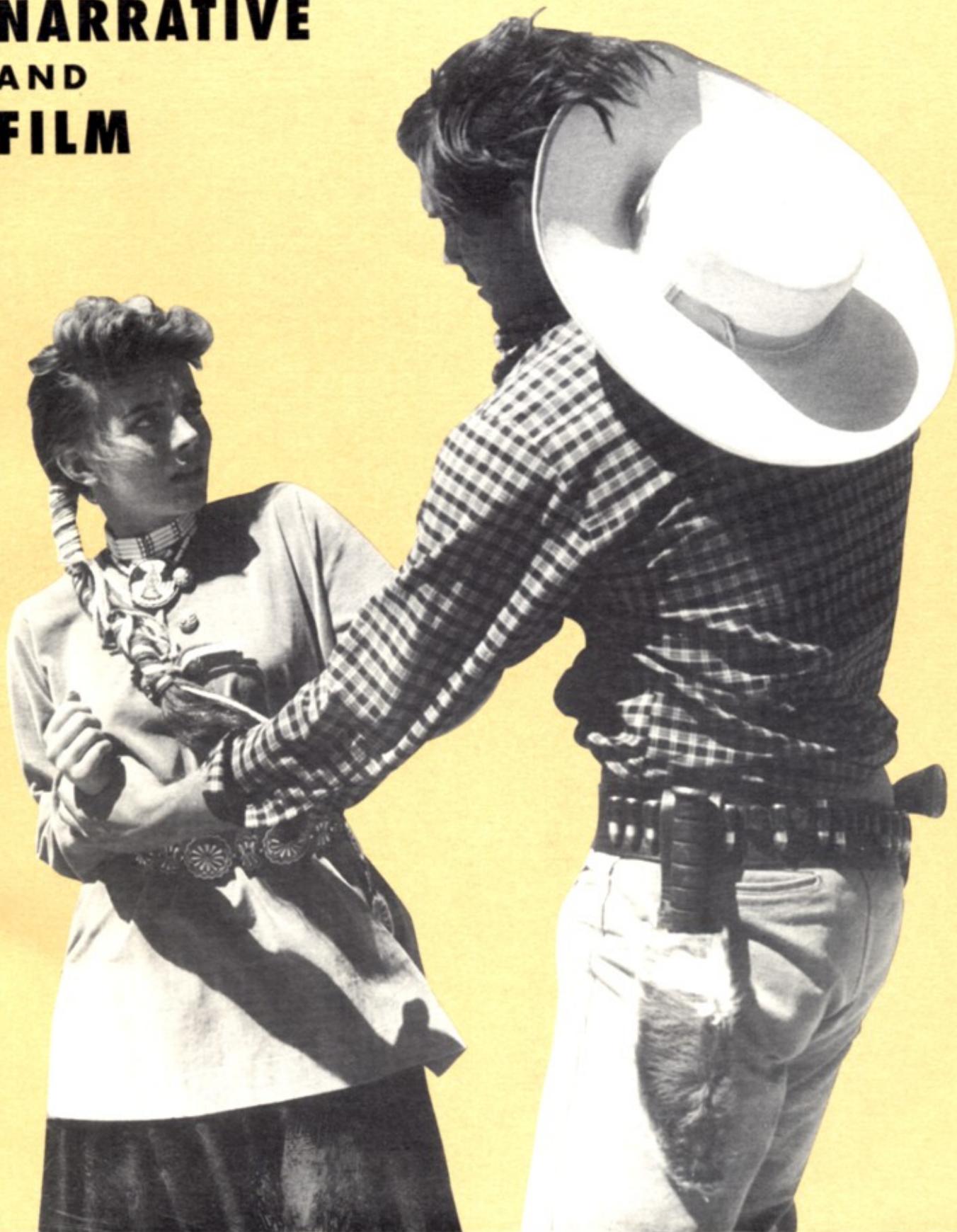


# cineACTION

RADICAL FILM CRITICISM AND THEORY

## NARRATIVE AND FILM





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## cineACTION

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FRONT COVER: from *The Searchers*, the reconnaissance:  
Debbie (Natalie Wood) and Martin (Jeffrey Hunter) re-meeting in the desert.

ABOVE: Anna Karina and Claude Brasseur in Godard's  
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## Narrative and Film



The basic narrative in *Vertigo*: love ...

We've chosen to devote this issue to questions and concerns regarding narrativity. Since the 70s, narrative cinema has served as a focal point for the debates surrounding realism and subjectivity. Filmmakers striving to produce alternatives to mainstream cinema, which has privileged narrative, have rejected, in whole or part, traditional storytelling. Narrativity has again surfaced as a theoretical and practical concern. The wholesale rejection of narrativity has been countered by a number of filmmakers and theorists who now see the potential value of narrative cinema (in various, modified forms) and the possibilities of its use for political and aesthetic ends.

We have always felt that mainstream realist narrative art has been used and continues to be used in remarkably complex ways, inviting sophisticated spectator positions for creating meaning. In the best examples, spectators are both active and aware, experiencing pleasure in identifying with a position of protest against oppression. For

example, a number of "women's films" use narrative to address issues of resistance and to challenge what is often left unsaid in everyday culture. *Letter from an Unknown Woman* and *Le Plaisir* are examples of classical narratives which problematize many of the claims put forth regarding the limitations and homogeneous character of traditional narrative cinema. Contemporary directors like Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, whose work is featured in this issue, stretch the boundaries of storytelling while making reference to the way images and narrative are incorporated into popular experience.

Narrativity (together with the related questions it poses with regards to film) is far from exhausted and has in fact been inadequately theorized. We hope this issue of *CineAction* will contribute to further thinking and rethinking of the pleasures and potentials of narrative and film in its various manifestations.

FLORENCE JACOBOWITZ  
AND  
RICHARD LIPPE



... and death.

# *Letter from an Unknown Woman*

THE DOUBLE NARRATIVE

by Robin Wood

This article is taken from a chapter in *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film*, a work-in-progress to be published by Columbia University Press in 1994.



I have no great faith in statistics, especially when they are applied to complex and delicate works of art. Whether the number of shots in a given Hollywood film conforms to the average, exceeds it, or falls below it, tells us nothing about its value. It does, however, tell us something about its particular nature, and thereby offers a useful starting point. *Letter from an Unknown Woman* is a film consisting of (not counting the credits) 366 shots, in 169 of which the camera moves. The number of shots is well below the Hollywood average, the number containing camera-movement well above it, the proportion unusually high. As movement (and its close relative time, which we all know never stands still: Stefan's line, 'For us, all the clocks in the world have stopped,' is one of the most ironic in all cinema) is for Ophüls far more than a stylistic flourish but has a thematic/



Lisa and Stefan:  
the first encounter.

metaphysical dimension, it seems legitimate to add to this total the 25 shots (not strictly camera-movements) inside a moving vehicle. There is also the significantly ambiguous scene (it unites the movement/stasis opposition and is placed at almost the exact midpoint of the film) in the 'fake' railway train in the Prater, where the moving scenery gives the illusion of the movement of the train.

#### The First Ten Shots

Of the film's first ten shots (up to the beginning of the visualization of Lisa's letter), seven contain camera-movement and an eighth (shot 2) is set inside a moving carriage. This throws into strong relief the moment when the con-

stant movement is arrested (shots 7 and 8): shot 7 dramatizes the notion of 'arrest' very precisely, as Stefan, reading the letter's opening sentence ('By the time you read this letter I may be dead'), freezes abruptly in mid-movement, in the act of raising his hands to his face from the water-basin. The moment establishes a central structuring principle: the movement/stasis opposition will be developed throughout the film, Stefan's constant restless, dissatisfied movement (from country to country, city to city, woman to woman) countered by Lisa's stasis (her waiting, her unshakable commitment and constancy), the opposition finally resolved in the ultimate 'arrest' of death. The letter itself signifies death, and Stefan will die (shortly after the film ends) as a direct result of reading it.

The opposition is enacted at many points in the film.

Some of these follow simply from the characters' social position/economic status: in 'Vienna, about 1900' the man goes to pay (for a single white rose, for another foreign country in the Prater railway train) while the woman sits and waits. Most significantly, however, all three of Stefan's and Lisa's major encounters are dramatized in this way: Lisa holding the door when Stefan (on his way out) sees her for the first time; Lisa motionless in the street near his apartment when he passes, notices her, turns, comes back, initiating their one night together; Lisa waiting by the piano in his apartment while Stefan moves about, checking his appearance, sending his servant out for food ('the usual things'), fetching champagne.

The relationship, however, is not presented solely in terms of opposites: they are also complements. Our first clear view of Stefan, at the end of the film's first shot, has him framed in the open window of a carriage, leaning in to talk to his friends; our first view of Lisa (shot 11) will be of her framed in the open window of a removal van, peering in at Stefan's possessions. The parallel introductions establish a complex pattern of identity and difference to which I shall return later.

The movement/stasis opposition, finally, must not be seen in merely personal terms ('characterization'). One function of this opening sequence is to establish the context within which Lisa's letter is received and read: the 'man's world,' defined in terms of duels, debauchery, worldliness and cynicism. The letter, with its religious insignia and intimations of mortality, not only interrupts the flow of cameramovement: it intrudes into this world and its values, asserting their opposites (purity, innocence, spirituality) and identifying them with the 'feminine.' Stefan and Lisa are consistently presented as exceptional rather than ordinary, but their ways of expressing their exceptionality are presented as determined, ultimately, by the cultural construction of gender in terms of polarized opposites.

### What Happens in Shot 11?

In shot 10 Stefan begins to read the letter, and Lisa's verbal narration begins on the soundtrack, carrying over the dissolve into shot 11. Joan Fontaine's voice (immediately identifiable), refined, romantic, sincere, somewhat dreamy, asserts at once a narrative authority: the voice of 'the star' is also the voice of 'truth,' our invitation to an unquestioning identification.

The possible relationships between verbal and visual narration have been very little explored in Hollywood cinema and only very occasionally outside it; usually, we are lulled into taking for granted an identity between what is said and what is shown. But the potentialities are extremely complicated and far-reaching; they arise from the basic and unalterable fact that the visual narration must always, and necessarily, convey far more detailed information than the verbal. Consider an elementary example: the sentence 'There was a pencil on the table.' If we read this sentence we assume we understand it perfectly, and each of us doubtless

forms his/her immediate mental picture. But what of the filmmaker who must render it as a visual image? There is no way it can be realized without telling us a hundred other things: Is the table round, square, rectangular? A coffee table, a dining table, a tripod table...? Is it bare or covered with a cloth? If bare, what kind of wood (or metal, or plastic)? If covered, is the cloth plain or patterned? What colour is the pencil? Is it sharpened? If so, with a sharpener or a penknife? Is there an eraser at its end? Is it cylindrical, triangular, polygonal? The filmmaker (or his set designer) would be forced to answer all these questions, and would in most cases answer them quite unconsciously, the one consideration being that the answers were not disruptive, drawing unwanted attention to themselves.

Another example: 'I entered the room. She was seated on the sofa, reading a book.' The filmmakers can of course show us just that, making the scene 'realistic' with plausible, non-distracting décor. But what if, as the narrator's voice uttered the words, we were shown her sitting in an armchair, knitting or peeling an orange? We would have to assume that the narrator was either insane, lying, or had misremembered; whatever we deduced, the authority of the verbal narration would be very seriously undermined, we could no longer identify with it as 'the truth.' (Except in very rare instances—*L'Année Dernière à Marienbad*, for example—we always trust the image over the word, which is why the 'lying flashbacks' of Hitchcock in *Stage Fright* and Alan Rudolph in *Mortal Thoughts* arouse so much hostility.) Ophüls—far more subtly—never contradicts Lisa. Her narration is allowed its own integrity, which he respects, even venerates: it is, as far as it goes, 'the truth.' But it is *her* truth, not his.

At the beginning of shot 11 Lisa is telling us that 'I think everyone has two birthdays: the day of his [sic!] physical birth and the beginning of his conscious life.' As she says this, in her dreamily romantic voice, the delivery men unloading the van into which she is peering knock a piece of furniture against Stefan's harp, producing an ugly discordant 'twang.' We must assume, obviously, that she did not notify Stefan of this in her letter, written as she was dying. But what we have here is not the addition of 'neutral' detail but a contradiction in *tone*: from the outset, Lisa's narration and Ophüls' narration are set in partial conflict, and that our first intimation of this is stirred by the notion 'discord' can hardly be accidental.

There can be no doubt of Ophüls' sympathetic commitment to Lisa and to her romanticism, nor of the film's communication of that commitment to the spectator: Lisa, from the beginning of her narration, is and remains our primary identification-figure. Yet that identification is constantly qualified—or counterpointed—by an ironic detachment. We believe, accept, sympathize with, everything Lisa tells us, everything she experiences. But we are continuously aware of so much that she *doesn't* tell us, and often (we assume) doesn't notice: everything, specifically, that might threaten the dominance of her romantic vision, opening it to question. I don't think the fineness of the balance Ophüls achieves and sustains—it has the uniqueness of the greatest art, beyond theory, beyond successful imitation—has been



The Prater sequence: Stefan plays for Lisa on the platform vacated by the women's orchestra.

fully appreciated: the balancing of two apparently incompatible modes, romanticism and irony, without ever permitting one to overwhelm the other, without ever lapsing into sentimentality or cynicism.

### The Consequences

The strategy established in shot 11 is developed immediately in shot 12. Lisa's instant infatuation, not with Stefan whom she has not yet seen, but with his 'beautiful things,' is rudely interrupted by her mother, who summons her indoors from an upstairs window. As she moves through the hall, the janitor is complaining 'Who is going to clean *that* up? Me, I suppose'; as she mounts the stairs (accompanied, without a cut, by one of Ophüls' graceful crane movements, involving us in her ascent), the delivery men, precariously hauling up Stefan's grand piano on pulleys, are complaining about having to move a musician ('Why must he play the piano? Why not the piccolo?'). Lisa passes without comment or apparent awareness, lost in her dream, in the

romantic aspirations the 'beautiful things' represent for her. As the letter has just announced this as the beginning of her 'conscious life,' we may be alerted to the things of which she is *not* conscious—here, most obviously, the working-class and their extremely unromantic existence.

The film develops this theme most elaborately in the Prater sequences. Lisa remains in the 'train' while Stefan goes to pay for the next country they will visit, closing the door of the compartment. We see, as she does not, the mechanisms and toil by means of which the romantic fantasies of the bourgeoisie are constructed: the old woman, heavily muffled against the cold, who takes the fare; the old man, similarly muffled, who must laboriously pedal the machinery that produces 'Venice' or 'Switzerland' to order. And in the following sequence, on the dance floor of the café, we are privileged to overhear the comments exchanged by members of the all-women's orchestra, kept long after hours as the lovers prolong their tryst: comments which neither hears.

Leaping to the end of the film, we may link this with the most telling point made *against* Lisa with any degree of explicitness: her jarringly failure to acknowledge in any way

whatever the mute manservant John/Art Smith, on her final visit to Stefan's apartment, a failure underlined when we discover that John remembers Lisa perfectly when Stefan, who has fathered her child, does not. John's awareness of, and benign kindness to, Lisa has been stressed earlier in the film; to Lisa, wholly absorbed in the possibly imminent fulfilment of her lifelong fantasy, he is simply a non-person.

Two films later, *The Reckless Moment* provides a striking parallel. There, Ophüls transforms the stereotypical figure of the black maid into arguably the most intelligent, certainly the most aware, character in the film; but, because Sybil/Francis Williams is black and a servant, Lucia Harper/Jean Bennett is quite incapable of recognizing the support and solidarity she offers until it is too late. The superior awareness with which both Sybil and John are credited is attributable precisely to the fact that they are outsiders: 'mere' servants, and respectively black and handicapped, they remain spectators, distanced from the tragedies of the bourgeois protagonists they serve, at once the most qualified to intervene and the least likely to be invited to do so.

The film's treatment of class—never a conscious issue for Lisa, very much one for the viewer—is complex and comprehensive. Ophüls' semi-mythical Vienna is real enough to make possible a systematic analysis of the class structure, from the exploited workers up to the aristocracy represented especially by von Stauffer: a reminder that, in his early theatrical days, Ophüls was associated with Brecht, and that he made what is arguably the most rigorously Brechtian of all films (*Komedie om Geld*, 1936) is not out of place here. Lisa's aspirations are clearly in part a product of her uneasy class position. The apartments of Stefan and of Lisa's mother are in the same building, Stefan's luxuriously furnished and equipped with a live-in manservant, that of Frau Berndle/Mady Christians shabbily furnished and servantless. Her late husband, superintendent of the municipal water-works, left her with nothing but his pension, and she is clearly living beyond her means; hence her marriage to Herr Kästner, the military tailor from Linz. Stefan, as artist/celebrity, has freedom of movement, including easy access to the aristocracy. Lisa falls in love before she has even seen him—first with his possessions, then with his music. The film never allows us to think of her, of course, as a 'social climber': what she is attracted to is not mere vulgar wealth or social position, but the fineness of the cultural artifacts wealth can buy and, more especially, the emotional, spiritual and imaginative freedom of art and freedom of movement of the (male) artist, to whom the whole world is open. She marries von Stauffer for the security of her illegitimate child, not for any personal material motive.

Consideration of the film's presentation of class structure leads inevitably to its presentation of the position of women within it. I intend 'presentation' to carry its Brechtian overtones: by heightening awareness without actually disrupting the 'realist' mode, the double narration 'presents' as much as it 'represents.' It is scarcely news that patriarchy has divided women into two categories, the wife/mother and the whore; where so many films reproduce this inertly, *Letter*—through its stylization, its 'presentational' manner,

its *obtrusive* structuring of 'twinned' scenes and shots—produces a critical awareness of it. It also subtly undermines the wife/whore opposition by collapsing the two categories. Prostitution, explicit in the novella, repressed from the film's surface, returns to haunt it everywhere: the question of whether or not Lisa actually resorts to it to support her child is really irrelevant. The notion of women as merchandise for purchase by the male pervades the film, from its early depiction of Stefan's nightly 'conquests' to the ultimate horror of the old drunken soldier's attempt to pick up Lisa as she flees from Stefan's apartment. The theme receives its fullest elaboration in the presentation of the dress shop of 'Madame' Spitzer/Sonia Bryden, where the women come to purchase clothes and their husbands come to purchase the models.

It is crucial to the film's meaning that it presents marriage and the role of wife not in opposition to this but simply as an alternative form of the same thing. The three marriages (two actual, one projected) in the film are all based upon the woman-as-merchandise motif. There is the direct paralleling of Frau Berndle's marriage to Herr Kästner and Lisa's to von Stauffer: in both cases the woman sells herself for her own and her child's financial security, and both are essentially loveless, at least on the woman's side (given the portrayal of Herr Kästner, we are not invited to take seriously Frau Berndle's nervous assertion that she can still 'be in love with a man'). If the men—or at least von Stauffer—'love,' it is the kind of love sanctioned by patriarchy that is contaminated at its very roots by the principle of possession: the image that introduces (and defines) Lisa's marriage is of von Stauffer fastening a tight-fitting diamond necklace around her throat, a signifier at once of payment and ownership. The projected marriage—of Lisa in Linz to the young lieutenant (John Good) who confidently anticipates an 'outstanding military career'—is presented similarly: she is dressed up as a 'lady,' instructed by mother and stepfather how to comport herself, offered up as an attractive object for purchase. The narrative moves from that, with flawless logic, to Lisa's employment in Madame Spitzer's establishment.

Ophüls' figure for the embodiment of patriarchal oppression (consistent not only throughout *Letter* but linking it to earlier and later films, notably *Liebelei* and *Madame de...*) is the military man: the higher the rank the greater the oppression. The figure, in its various forms and ranks, pervades the film: the elderly general who approaches Madame Spritzer to negotiate for Lisa (and is told, 'She is not like that...'), and the young soldiers who tap on the window at night to attract her attention; the young lieutenant in Linz and his high-ranking father whose role he is destined to reproduce; von Stauffer himself (his exact position and function is not clear to me, but on formal occasions he wears a military uniform, and has crossed sabres behind his desk); the old soldier who accosts Lisa in the street. Even Herr Kästner is a 'military tailor.' Given this context, perhaps the film's most chilling moment—a tiny detail, almost thrown away—is the appearance during the famous long take (often seen as the 'key' to the film) in the opera house of a small boy dressed in military uniform, led by the hand by his mil-

itary father. The moment permits one to construct a (chronological) chain of transmitted patriarchal deathliness: the child in the opera house—the young lieutenant in Linz—Johann von Stauffer.

As the privileged signifier of patriarchy the figure has complex connotations: that patriarchal prestige depends, not on personal distinction, but on externals like uniform and rank, that patriarchal authority is more shell than substance; that the notion of 'domination' takes many forms—domination of 'the enemy,' domination of women, domination, above all, of the self, and of the 'feminine' within the self. In the last resort, what the figure signifies for Ophüls is deathliness: the 'triumph of the will' that stamps out life in the name of 'order,' 'propriety,' 'morality,' 'honour,' 'tradition.' Hence, *Liebelei*, *Letter* and *Madame de...* all progress inexorably toward the execution of the lover (in *Liebelei* only the *supposed* lover) at the hands of the 'wronged' and righteous military husband. It should be added that Ophüls' vision darkens as his work progresses, the lover becoming progressively less innocent and less attractive: Stefan is less sympathetic, and infinitely more corrupt, than the young officer of *Liebelei*, and Donati in *Madame de...* (though far from 'corrupt' as that term is usually understood) far less sympathetic than Stefan, securely inscribed (as diplomat) in the oppressive and discredited patriarchal order.

#### 'She is not like that...'

Which brings us to the crux (and core) of the film, Lisa's romanticism and the complex, delicately balanced attitude (commitment to, detachment from) that is defined toward it. This cannot possibly be understood except in relation to the whole. A long time ago, F. R. Leavis coined the phrase 'The Novel as Dramatic Poem.' It became the basis for his exploration of George Eliot, Conrad, James, Lawrence, and finally Dickens: the proposition that a great novel can be distinguished from lesser works by the interrelatedness of all its parts and aspects—that it cannot be adequately read 'just for the story,' but must be seen as a complex organism in which everything is related to and dependent upon everything else. I see no problem in extending the concept to film, and claim *Letter from an Unknown Woman* as one of the supreme examples of 'the film as dramatic poem.'

Essentially, Lisa's romanticism represents an instinctive refusal to live within and be bound by the class and gender constraints of her culture; as such it is revolutionary. It achieves grandeur and nobility because it totally rejects the socially inscribed and sanctioned subordination of women to patriarchal privilege, and because in doing so it at once transcends and rejects the wife/whore opposition of patriarchal culture. Yet a condition of that transcendence is that the romantic fantasy is by definition incapable of fulfilment, and leads inevitably to both destruction and self-destruction. It is its rigorous working-through of this quandary—unresolvable, within the social context described, except in death—that raises the film to the level of tragedy.

Consider, first, one of the finest and subtlest of the film's

examples of 'twinned' shots, the two high angle shots of Stefan's homecomings, with the camera positioned on a landing above the staircase. In the first, the teenage Lisa has fled from the threatened departure for Linz and has waited for hours to offer herself to Stefan. The camera is behind her and to her left, so that it has something of the effect of a point-of-view shot whilst keeping Lisa within the frame. Looking down, with her, we watch Stefan enter the lobby with his latest conquest, go through the customary exchange with the janitor ('Who is it?/ 'Brandt'/ 'Good evening, Mr. Brandt') that echoes through the entire film, and escort the giggling woman into his apartment. Lisa leaves for Linz. In the second shot, the foreground is empty but the camera occupies the same position and executes the same movement. Stefan's companion of the night is now Lisa, totally immersed in the apparent miraculous realization of her dream.

It is an extraordinary moment. What we have here is clearly a further refinement of the 'double narration': the examples I gave earlier were limited to the *content* of various images; the present instance is created essentially by Ophüls' use of the technical specificities of *mise-en-scène*—camera placement, camera movement, *découpage*. It is by these means that we are allowed a position of ironic detachment that is obviously not available to Lisa. The primary meaning might seem to be: Look, you fool, you're just one of a whole nocturnal procession...

But Lisa is not a fool, and the effect is far more complex. Not only is she different from the other women (the groupies of 'Vienna, about 1900') whom Stefan brings home: we have seen that he has registered this difference and is deeply impressed by it. To appreciate Lisa we must do justice to Stefan: to see him as merely worthless and contemptible is to miss much of the film's complexity, and the depth of its tragic sense. In fact, the film supplies the means for us to understand him rather intimately.

Like Lisa, we are introduced to the young Stefan through his piano playing: he is practising *Un Sospiro*, the popular virtuoso piece by Liszt that provides the film's main theme music, difficult but not among his all-but-impossible. At the work's most taxing moment Stefan falters, makes a mistake, breaks off abruptly—then, instead of repeating the passage, slams down the piano lid and leaves the apartment. In a later sequence Lisa steals from her mother's apartment at night to listen to Stefan's playing through an open ventilator-window over the stairs. Again he is practising *Un Sospiro*; this time he gets the passage right. Lisa smiles.

Taken in conjunction, the two scenes tell us a great deal about Stefan and about Lisa's fixation on him. The first reveals his insecurity. He is a 'young prodigy,' whom the artistic world, the public, the press, expect to have an outstanding musical career (the parallel/opposite of the 'outstanding military career' of the young lieutenant). His reaction, in the first scene, to his momentary failure (giving up, going out, perhaps to the artists' café he frequents, instead of systematically analyzing and mastering the problem) speaks eloquently of his fear of not being able to meet those expectations (which are also his own, of himself). It is easy to grasp from this the role that sex and 'conquests' play in

his life: not just distraction, but reassurance: if he can never quite become the great pianist of his own and others' expectations, then he can always demonstrate to himself his attractiveness to women, proving it over and over again, conquering with each, if only temporarily, his fears of inadequacy.

The function of the second scene, on the other hand, is to establish the reality of Stefan's potential, though a potential that will never be realized. And, as Lisa listens on the stairs, we know that she is identifying with him and willing him to 'get it right,' and that when he does, it is somehow *her* achievement as much as his. The whole basis of the relationship—her fantasy of vicarious empowerment—is there, in the moment of her smile.

Stefan's clearly genuine response to Lisa when they eventually meet is the reawakening of his sense of his own potential, of the possibility of overcoming his addiction (for the ignominious role of women in his life appears the equivalent of that of drugs or alcohol). He acknowledges Lisa's difference in many ways, all of them touched with ambiva-

lence or precariously suppressed cynicism (see his remarks in the restaurant about the advantages of having a 'sorceress' on hand to keep him steady); his purchase of a single white rose from the flower-seller who anticipates that he will buy the usual red ones; his decision not to have the carriage (driven by another worker clearly familiar with his habits) closed; his response to Lisa's concern (in the open carriage) that he not catch cold, arranging the scarf around his throat ('It's a long time since anyone did that for me').

The 'twinning' of the staircase shots is not, then, a matter of simple irony. We are to be aware of difference as well as similarity, and the emotional response evoked depends upon the tension between the two, the similarity suggesting already Stefan's inability to break from his habituation, the difference the potential that is lost. It is also reasonable to conjecture that Lisa, in reawakening his sense of his potential, also reawakens his sense of the enormous demands this makes on him, and his fears of inadequacy. If this is so, then she herself negates the fulfilment of her own desires.

Paired scenes: i. The first farewell at the station.



## Narcissism

To understand Lisa further it is necessary to invoke psychoanalysis. As I watch *Letter from an Unknown Woman* at least once a year, it is no great coincidence that I had just seen it when I read Juliet Mitchell's seminal *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*. Mitchell's consideration of narcissism immediately struck a chord, permitting me fresh access to the nature of Lisa's romanticism. Mitchell writes of narcissism predominantly in male terms, with reference to the Romantic poets, such as Shelley, and I have taken little from her but the basic perception: that romantic love is, almost by definition, narcissistic.

In its popular usage, narcissism is always regarded as a 'bad thing' equated with excessive vanity. In the sense in which it is to be understood here, it loses these negative connotations, becomes something more like 'necessary self-esteem.' Its positive connotations take on particular significance when the term is applied to women, those 'waitresses at the banquet of life' (Bette Midler's felicitous phrase) whose self-esteem is liable to be frequently at a low ebb. For a woman, 'romantic love' is a somewhat different phenomenon than for a man, for whom it inevitably accrues ugly overtones of the desire to possess. (For the supreme filmic enactment and analysis of this, see Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, the ideal companion-piece to *Letter*).

Romantic love is never love for a person but for an ideal, and this ideal can only originate within the psyche of the lover. The ideal (related to Freud's 'ideal ego') is projected on to the chosen love object, and the lover then believes that the love object is the ideal. On whatever level of psychoanalytical awareness the filmmakers consciously worked, *Letter* is very clear and precise about this: Lisa falls in love with Stefan before she even knows what he looks like. (It is of course fortunate for the continuation and development of the fantasy that he looks like Louis Jourdan, but physical attraction is not its origin.) Her desire is to construct him as her ideal self, the 'self' that is denied expression by the conditions of her society. Far from being the sentimental, and sexist, story of a woman who nobly sacrifices herself for the redemption of an unworthy man, *Letter* is the story of a woman driven to the *vicarious* realization of her own frustrated creativity.

Lisa, as I have said, is not stupid: Stefan's potential self, and the ideal self that Lisa projects on to it, make a plausible enough fit, which is why the film is a profoundly compassionate tragedy rather than a cruel farce. Why, then, can the fantasy never be realized?

Primarily, because the ideal self constructed by the psyche cannot, by definition, be permitted any flaws or weaknesses. Lisa is perfectly able to make compromises for herself—working in Madame Spitzer's shop, marrying von Stauffer for the protection and security of her child (Stefan's child, and Stefan reborn). The compromises, it should be added, are external and practical: her refusal, even under pressure, to tell her husband that she is 'happy' registers as a heroic gesture, the preservation of her true integrity, which is also the 'self' she keeps for Stefan. But where Stefan is concerned no compromise is possible. She cannot

confront him on his return from La Scala: *he* must come to *her*, and if he has forgotten he must not be reminded. She cannot tell him that she is pregnant, or that she has borne his child. The reason she gives for this in the letter—that she wished to be the one woman who never asked him for anything—is illuminating: as Stefan must be either perfect or nothing, she must be perfect to match. One of the film's most painful moments is that when Stefan looks at the photographs of his son that Lisa has enclosed—the son he has never seen, or been allowed to know existed—his face registering a nostalgia for something he never had and that Lisa in effect (in the name of perfection and integrity) denied him. Lisa can never really see Stefan, let alone accept his weaknesses. She can allow herself to be aware that he is always looking for something he hasn't yet found, because the 'something' is herself; beyond that, she can see only the fantasy ideal that she has superimposed over him.

Hence the ultimate painfulness of their final encounter. When Stefan—his career effectively over, his habit of debauchery thoroughly confirmed—sees Lisa at the opera and confronts her in the darkness outside, we see a haunted, ravaged human being. The old bad habits are still there, trying to reassert themselves ('You must know that, where there is a pursued, there must also be a pursuer'), but it is clear that this is not another casual pick up but an impulse of desperation, a plea for help: he has, on some level, recognized Lisa even though he has no idea who she is. When she visits him in his apartment he has recovered his poise, and the habits have taken over completely: he treats her as just another *belle-de-nuit*, a resourceful woman who has managed to evade her husband for the thrill of a one-night stand. She leaves. Given the terms on which she has built her life, she is of course right to do so, she could scarcely do anything else: her humiliation is so complete and so cruel, her fantasy at last ruthlessly demolished. Yet—such is the film's complexity—she is also wrong. Stefan, fetching champagne from another room, has just told her that '...there was something you said to me last night that's been on my mind all day. Do you believe that?' Lisa responds, softly, out of earshot, to herself, 'No, I don't believe you,' and departs before he returns. The camera follows her, then, as she leaves the apartment, stops to frame the table on which lies the bunch of white roses she has brought (with their accumulated significance—the flower-seller told her that there were 'just a few flowers left') and a guttering candle. If she had waited, Stefan would have had to tell her what it was she'd said that had haunted him (it could only have been 'What are you waiting for?' to which he responded 'That's a very disturbing question'), and the whole issue of the relationship would have been reopened. It would have been, of course, a relationship impossible for Lisa to accept: Stefan is a mere human being, and a ruined one, perhaps irrecoverably sunk in his addictions, no longer a plausible incarnation of the Ideal Ego.

Lisa's inability to understand Stefan, and the impossibility that she could ever 'help' him (as he had once suggested, and she had echoed, during their one night of intimacy), is confirmed by a final small, almost 'throwaway,' touch: when the old soldier accosts her, fleeing from Stefan's apart-

ment, and propositions her ('Take you somewhere? Anywhere? It makes no difference'), she glances up from him to the window of Stefan's apartment, identifying the two men. But for Ophüls and the spectator there remains, surely, *some* difference: Stefan, however debased, cannot be identified, in the context of the film, with a 'military man.'

But Lisa herself, at moments, comes close to grasping that her fantasy is just that, and that she prefers it to reality. As they walk through the snow-covered grounds of the Prater, she explains to Stefan why he prefers it in winter: because he can imagine what it would be like in spring, whereas in spring there'd be nothing to imagine. The remark is central to the film, and to Ophüls' awareness, consistent through so many of his films, of the disempowerment of women in patriarchal society. One may link it to her remark, in the foyer of the Vienna Opera, so often taken for the 'message' of the film, that '...nothing happens by chance,' that everything is predetermined and out of one's hands.

If it is appropriate to apply rigorously to the film that much-debased word 'tragic,' it is because here so much is lost, and there was so much at stake.

### Oedipus rears his head again

It may seem surprising that I have left consideration of the film's Oedipal patterns so long, and that I now, having arrived there at last, propose to play down their importance. Oedipus—especially in his Lacanian extensions—has, after all, dominated most film theory for the past two decades. It has been demonstrated many times over that every Hollywood film is really about him (and, it would seem at times, about nothing else): the 'Oedipal trajectory,' whereby the rebellious Son learns to accept his symbolic castration and to identify with the Father, assuming his position, and is rewarded with the necessary woman, replacement for the mother he has had to relinquish, has been traced through Hollywood films *ad* and *post nascitum*, each film ending with the construction of the 'good' heterosexual couple, the new father and mother, the woman subordinated to the man; or, if it can't be constructed (because of death or necessary separation), the reaffirmation of its supreme value. It is not entirely clear to me that this is much more interesting than having someone (who has just found it out) solemnly demonstrate that most of Mozart's and Haydn's first movements are in sonata form.

I am not going to contest its general validity: it would be surprising if it were *not* the case. The core of our cultural formation is the patriarchal nuclear family (though today the nucleus shows welcome signs of imminent dissolution, despite the popular attempts of certain politicians to reaffirm 'family values'), and, on the level of the unconscious, the Oedipus complex and its resolution have been the means by which it is perpetuated. If such a structure is crucial to a given culture, we might well expect it to play a defining role in that culture's popular art. Two tendencies, however, strike me as singularly unfortunate. One is the

tendency to reduce Hollywood movies to the reproduction of the Oedipal trajectory, at the expense of all the other layers of meaning generated, and to assume that the reproduction is invariably inert and uncritical. The other is to repeat and reinforce Freud's error in assuming (as he does most of the time) that the Oedipal process is somehow necessary, innate, universal and unchangeable.

Of course, you can't change the unconscious by looking at it sternly and saying 'Change!' However, there is every reason to believe that it is as subject to social change as our conscious beliefs and assumptions. It is perhaps more resistant, partly because it is largely inaccessible: it will not change overnight. The change will occur gradually, over the years, perhaps over several generations. As the position of women becomes stronger, as 'family values' become increasingly besieged (it was never necessary, in the past, for politicians to scream about them from platforms), as the variety and complexity of human sexuality becomes ever more widely recognized and accepted, so the hold of Oedipus on our culture will be loosened. It would be absurd (absurdly premature) at this point to abandon Freud, whose work still holds many of the keys to the future. Yet isn't it equally absurd to apply his ideas (developed, precisely, within the rigid cultural structures of 'Vienna, about 1900') without the slightest modification, as if nothing had changed and as if the unconscious were not changing with it?

This is why, though I continue to draw upon psychoanalytic theory when it suits my purposes, I do so with increasing caution, preferring to concentrate my attention on social formations and seeing the psychic formations of the individual in their context—to place films within the currents of change rather than the stasis of essentialism. Nonetheless, the Oedipal patterns of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* are certainly insistent enough to demand acknowledgement.

So insistent, one might argue, that they can hardly be described as inertly reproduced within the film, any more than can gender roles and class position. The function of the 'presentational' manner is to make *all* the thematic material accessible to a conscious analysis. Perhaps the clearest instance of this, as far as Oedipus is concerned, in all Ophüls' work is the last shot of *The Reckless Moment*: the supposed (re-)construction of the 'good couple' and the reconstitution of the united family. As Lucia (earlier described by Donnelly as a 'prisoner' of her family), after weeping uncontrollably on the conjugal bed, descends the stairs to take her husband's transatlantic phone-call, the 'family group' forms in the background of the shot, each member regaining his/her prescribed role and position: useless, obsolete grandfather, undervalued and disempowered black maid; son (resistant throughout the film to formal attire), dressed in an adult-style suit; daughter, wearing her mother's fur coat: the bourgeois Oedipal family *par excellence*. As Lucia, in the slightly gushing manner required by her mother/wife position, mouths the inane reassuring platitudes that are expected of her, the camera cranes down to frame her behind the bars of the banisters. It is one of the most devastating and desolate 'happy endings' in Hollywood cinema, the candour of its irony outdoing even Sirk, who was to work his own variation of it (with the con-



Paired scenes: ii The second visit to the artists' café.

ugal positions reversed, but Joan Bennett again in the wife/mother role) six years later in *There's Always Tomorrow*.

Oedipal patterning crisscross throughout *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. In the sequences of their one night of love, Lisa is cast as both Stefan's mother (fixing the scarf around his throat in the carriage) and his daughter ('Now I see you as a little girl'); her desire to be his mother (as well as his muse) is realized through her own child, also named Stefan (and Leo B. Pessin, besides being a remarkable child actor, is a remarkably plausible young Louis Jourdan), who is allowed to sleep in her bed (though only when she isn't in it). The film can be seen to move toward the 'tragic' version of the Oedipal resolution: the 'son' killed by the 'father' for taking away the 'mother.' The 'father' is in fact divided into two, both significantly given the same Christian name,

though in different languages: the film's culmination has the benign father, the servant John, patting Stefan on the back (if he could speak he would be saying, 'You're doing the right thing at last, my boy') as he leaves to receive his execution at the hands of the punishing father, Johann von Stauffer. Other critics may well wish to base an entire reading of the film on such patterns, or at least place far greater emphasis on them than I do. They are in no way incompatible with what I have written, but they do not enormously engage me.

More interesting to me (because more directly related to my concern with gender construction, resistance to it, and the consequences of that resistance) are the hints the film offers about Lisa's own Oedipal progress, which is to say the least idiosyncratic. That Lisa has rejected the 'correct'

female progression (accepting her own 'castration' and learning to identify with the mother) is clear: her desire to be Stefan's 'mother' is secondary to her desire to identify herself with him, and if she repeats her mother's pattern (marrying a man she does not love for security), this is because it is the 'option' her society forces upon her. The dialogue in the Prater 'railway' makes it clear that Lisa identified with her father, and acquired from him the tendency to escape into fantasy: he brought home travel brochures, and father and daughter (after he had put on his 'travelling coat') toured the world in their imaginations. Lisa says, 'He had the nicest eyes,' and Stefan, gazing into her own, responds 'I can see them.' Lisa's father, then, held the social position of the symbolic Father (breadwinner of the patriarchal family), but was in himself essentially a passive, 'feminized' figure. One might, if one wished, trace from this Lisa's rejection of the prescribed female role, her desire for identification with the male, but at the same time her constant passive 'waiting,' her stasis, her inability to take decisive action. The danger of such an interpretation is, not that it is 'wrong,' but that it tends to restrict everything to the psychology of the individual, without acknowledging that that psychology is determined by the social formations about which the film is so detailed and eloquent, and that it is the social formations that must be changed.

I cannot leave this without drawing attention to one marvellous throwaway moment in the film that enacts Lisa's commitment to (literally) the male position. After she first sets eyes on Stefan she determines, as the prospective object-for-the-gaze and female supporter of male enterprise, to improve herself for him, taking more trouble over her personal appearance, going to the library to read the lives of the great composers, etc. This is shown us in a series of very brief vignettes, one of which has Lisa attending dancing class. She arrives late, and watches, for a moment, through a glass partition, the two lines, male and female, practising their steps. Then, still outside the partition, she joins in—on the male side.

### The Ending

As I began with the beginning I must end with the end, thereby reproducing in criticism that closure and symmetry that critics who reject mainstream cinema in favour of the various available forms of the *avant-garde* find so peculiarly reprehensible.

Closure there is, certainly. We can be sure, at the end, of a number of things: that Stefan goes voluntarily to meet his death at the hands of von Stauffer; that he has undergone some form of moral, or spiritual, redemption, by reading the letter and recovering the past; that Lisa has, after all, triumphed, although her victory involves the deaths of herself, her lover, and their child. In the film's first shot, the clock strikes two, the carriage arrives, rain is falling; at the end the clock strikes five (it is near dawn), the carriage departs, the rain has stopped. Three hours (and eighty-seven minutes of remarkably concentrated screen time)

have elapsed, fifteen-plus years have been recaptured, the hermeneutics of the opening (Will Stefan fight the duel?—Who is the lethal antagonist?—Why is it being fought? etc...) have all been resolved. One can read (if one wishes) the reaffirmation of the value of the good heterosexual couple: Stefan understands that he should have married Lisa, reformed his ways, allowed her to fulfil her 'ideal' role as muse/wife/mother. Inspired by her, he could have been a great pianist, had a happy life between concert engagements, and basked in Lisa's wifely (if somewhat demanding) adoration.

Is that what Stefan understands? Is it the meaning of his enigmatic, rueful smile, as he turns at the gate for the last time to see either Lisa-as-ghost or an empty doorway (depending upon whether you respect the film or the wishes of its director)? Or is it the kind of closure that the semiotics/structuralist school has taught us to impose on Hollywood films at the expense of all other meanings, overvaluing the purely conventional aspects of the narrative movement at the cost of all the authentically creative particularities of the actual work in front of us?

Before attempting to answer such questions, I must consider one further interpretation, somewhat alien to my own position, that carries considerable weight, supported by numerous concrete details: a Christian—and specifically Catholic—reading of the film.

Lisa's letter is surmounted by the insignia 'St. Catherine's Hospital,' and the sign of the cross. It ends with (replacing her signature, as she died before she could sign it) a message from 'Sister Teresa': 'May God have mercy on you both.' When Lisa waits, watching for Stefan, on the night of their meeting, she is standing beside a niche in which is placed a statue of the Holy Virgin. At the end of the film, Stefan, the sinner, is redeemed by reading the letter; Lisa, who is also a sinner as well as a saviour, is redeemed by redeeming him. Dawn; the rain has stopped.

It is easy, of course, to dovetail this reading with the banal 'reaffirmation of the good couple' one: each supports the other. It lent a particular plausibility by the fact that it is the *only* reading that really explains John, the mute servant: he is Stefan's guardian angel. John, clearly a privileged character, is permitted an apparently supernatural knowledge. It is not just that he remembers Lisa (who appears not to remember *him*) when Stefan doesn't. He seems to know the content of the letter (we are certainly not to suppose that he has steamed it open!) and the effect it will have on Stefan: how else to account for the fact that he does *not* (contrary to his master's instructions) summon a cab for Stefan's 'indefinite' stay abroad? And how, for that matter, does he know the letter was from Lisa (as she died before completing it there can hardly have been a return address on the envelope)? I think this reading is available to anyone who wants it. Doubtless, just as Catholic dogma, in all its baffling convolutions, has an answer to everything in human existence, so such a reading could account, if pursued far enough, for everything in the film. I would add only that Ophüls' attitude to Catholicism in the late French films (*Le Plaisir* and, especially, *Madame de...*) is distinctly more ambiguous, and can be read ironically, as it cannot, I think, here.

## 'If you have a message, send it Western Union'

Samuel Goldwyn's famous remark—on a certain level characteristically crass—has quite profound reverberations when one is seriously discussing art and its function. We cannot possibly know what the precise intentions were when Max Ophüls, Howard Koch, William Dozier (the instigator, head of 'Rampart Productions' at the time), Joan Fontaine, John Houseman (the producer), Franz Planer (the cinematographer), made *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, or even who controlled those intentions. Even if we hypothesize (what is clearly untrue) that it is purely and unproblematically a 'film by Max Ophüls,' and could go back into the past and ask him, we could not expect that the result would be a 'definitive' statement. In these days of 'political correctness' (a concept that, however honourable its origins, seems to have been co-opted as a right-wing myth to discredit and ridicule the Left), it is necessary to reaffirm that a great artist is one who, whatever her/his conditioning or the consciously held beliefs in which it results, is not afraid to open her/himself to experience. I have no desire to 'fix' *Letter from an Unknown Woman* within one meaning. I offer only to define what seems important to me, now, as an individual very much involved in contemporary debates about, attitudes toward, gender, sexuality, feminism, and I refuse to slip into the error (common to academic, and basically conservative, critics) of asserting or implying that my reading is 'objective,' 'definitive,' etc. On the other hand, I would passionately defend its validity.

So, how do I read the film's conclusion? For me, the crucial moment (which the *mise-en-scène* underlines) is where Stefan, leaving to face his death, plucks the single white rose from the bunch Lisa has brought him, and places it inside his coat above his heart (the point at which von Stauffer will of course aim). Stefan's enigmatic smile as he sees (or does not see—it really doesn't matter) Lisa for the last time, acknowledges less his moral redemption (though that is of course important) than his realization of the impossibility of everything, and the sadness of it.

I shall not attempt to answer the question, What does Stefan understand? He, like Lisa, is but a character (if a leading one) in a highly complex, thoroughly organized, 'dramatic poem,' and whatever he understands does not necessarily coincide with what we, as audience, understand. It was a single white rose that he chose for Lisa, at the outset of their night together, as his acknowledgement of her difference, her 'specialness.' In reciprocating the gift by accepting the rose and his own death, he not merely acknowledges her but identifies himself with her. In accepting death at the hands of von Stauffer (who is, in his well-meaning deathly way, merely fulfilling the requirements of patriarchal/masculinist duty), he is not merely completing the (negative) Oedipal trajectory, he is refusing the accoutrements of masculine privilege, the illusory 'power and freedom' (to quote *Vertigo*) that men have throughout history appropriated. Is this not why, at the end of the film, one experiences such a sense of uplift? Not

because Stefan has achieved some vaguely defined metaphysical 'redemption,' but because the terms of that redemption are so precise, specific and social?

But this is not sufficient. Closure or not, and despite the fact that Stefan dominates the framework, this is Lisa's film (is it not, after all, that intellectually despised commodity a 'star vehicle' for Joan Fontaine?). We never identify with Stefan as intimately as we identify with Lisa; the main body of the film is far too powerful for the framework to close it off in any neat, conventional, schematic way. For the spectator, surely, Lisa survives Stefan's death: it is her film, absolutely. Implicitly, almost every leading female character in classical Hollywood films, and almost every major female star (Garbo, Dietrich, Crawford, Davis, Hepburn, Stanwyck...), seems to be calling out for the advent of the women's movement of the sixties and seventies. Lisa, in her apparent self-sacrifice—a self-sacrifice that is only apparent—is among the most eloquent.

### A note on *Le Plaisir*

Of the four films Ophüls made in France after his return to Europe, *Le Plaisir* is the one that most clearly develops the potentials of the 'double narration,' and it seems relevant to discuss it briefly here.

Those who are familiar with the film only in its North American release version have not really seen it, though they have seen the images of which it is composed; no one has seen the film Ophüls originally envisaged, because it was never made. The original concept was a film of three Guy de Maupassant tales, of which the third was to be *La Femme de Paul*. But the film (intended as a follow-up to the international success of *La Ronde*), necessitating a lavish budget and virtually the complete roster of available French stars, was dependent upon international (especially U.S.) distribution to recoup its costs and ensure a profit. If an Ophüls version of *La Femme de Paul* had constituted its climax, the film could not have been shown in the United States in the fifties. I shall return to this.

The film that was made still utilizes three Maupassant stories: *The Mask*; *Madame Tellier's Establishment*; *The Model*. The third was the last minute replacement for *La Femme de Paul*, but the order remained constant. The whole was to be introduced, and intermittently narrated by 'the Author,' whom one can take (if one chooses) to be Maupassant himself, and who appears as a leading character in *The Model*. The central panel of the triptych, *Madame Tellier's Establishment*, is, in its cinematic realization, roughly twice as long as the other two together: the film, that is, was conceived as a 'triptych' in the precise sense of the medieval/Renaissance altar-piece, a large main panel contained between two much smaller ones. The length of the middle story, and the supposed American demand for 'happy endings' (it is the only one of the three whose ending could pass, with the most undiscerning of audiences, as 'upbeat'), decided the American distributor to change the



*Le Plaisir: Madame Tellier's Establishment: Madame Rosa (Danielle Darrieux), disturbed by the unaccustomed silence of the country, welcomes the companionship of Joseph's daughter (Joëlle Jany).*

*Le Plaisir: The final story, The Model (Simone Simon and Daniel Gelin).*



order of the episodes, placing *Madame Tellier* last. This makes nonsense of the (revised) concept, to the understanding of which it is also crucial that the 'author' of the third and final story be also the narrator of the film. The linking, offscreen, narration (parts of which were apparently removed, rendering what remains partly unintelligible, by an editor who didn't bother to ask anyone why there was so much black leader in the film) was dubbed in by Peter Ustinov; he is allowed to identify himself as the author of *The Model* ('What a relief to speak French again...'), but the significance of this is lost because the story itself is wrongly placed.

The original *Le Plaisir* is structured on a dual progression: the progressive self-assertion of women; the progressive discrediting of the 'omniscient' male author. In other words, the gap between the narrating voice and Ophüls' *mise-en-scène* widens as the film unfolds. At the beginning, against black leader, the author/narrator tells us that he likes to remain in the dark and never be seen; in the last story he is 'exposed' in both senses of the word, revealed in brilliant sunlight, a character who really understands nothing and whose influence provokes the final catastrophe.

In the first story, *The Mask*, there is no dislocation between narrator and narrative, and women play entirely subordinate and ignominious roles, complicit in the worst excesses of male privilege. Not that male privilege is in any way endorsed: the subject is, precisely, the 'mask' of masculine egotism, and its ruthless exposure. The women divide schematically into wife/whore: on the one hand the wife of the male protagonist, wearer of the mask, celebrated dancer of quadrilles, whose sense of his masculinity depends upon his dancing prowess—the wife who waits masochistically every night for her aged husband's return from his masked cavortings, her one bitter pleasure in life the satisfaction of knowing that he can still 'make it'; on the other dance hall women, subdivided into marriageable girls trying to catch rich husbands, and professional 'dancing partners.' (It's a horrifying thought, but one cannot help wondering if the husband and wife constitute Ophüls' portrait of Stefan and Lisa as they would have ended up if they'd married, the sour dénouement that lies in wait for romantic fantasy if it has the misfortune to be realized). Here, the narrator's man-of-the-world cynicism is largely congruent; if Ophüls

undercuts it, it is through his constant camera-movement, claustrophically cluttered sets, tilt shots and disturbingly unbalanced compositions that create the dance hall as a hell beyond cynicism.

His realization of the *Madame Tellier* story never actually contradicts the verbal narration, or comments on it contrapuntally in the manner of *Letter*. The increasing deviation is one of tone. This is established at the outset: the narrator's very knowing and suggestive description of the brothel, inviting male complicity, has no equivalent for Ophüls' circling camera, which never enters but introduces each of the prostitutes in turn behind a barred window, the brothel as prison. And, although we accept the convention that implies that everything is 'told' by the narrator (unless, as in *Letter*, it is obviously not), it is surely significant that he nowhere intrudes or comments upon the Joseph/Madame Rosa relationship, the only decent, non-exploitive male-female relationship in the entire film, nipped in the bud by that extraordinary pincer-movement of wife and 'Madame' at the moment at which it might be consummated, 'wife' and 'whore' converging to prevent an honest eroticism. (The relationship carries great weight anyway, in the context, but this is underlined by the casting of Jean Gabin and Danielle Darrieux, the two biggest stars in a 'star-studded' movie.) When the smartly cynical voice-over resumes to close the narrative, we are already sufficiently alienated to be prepared for the narrator's 'exposure.'

Unlike the women in *The Mask*, the prostitutes of *Madame Tellier's Establishment* have a certain, albeit strictly circumscribed, power. The humour of the story's framework depends upon the revelation that the brothel is the true centre of the respectable small-town society: the night it is found closed, the community falls apart. Madame Tellier herself is a shrewd, almost ruthless, capitalist, and she and her women have, by selling themselves, achieved a certain economic power. But, dominating the room in which Madame does her accounts, is the portrait of her late husband, originator of the wealth, and the 'work' that permits the women their limited prestige also excludes them, not only from any openly accepted role in the community, but from any meaningful human relationship with a man. The 'pincer movement' referred to earlier is a key moment in Ophüls' work: the (respectively, officially and unofficially) socially sanctioned institutions of marriage and prostitution seen as equally repressive. The end of this central panel underlines both the women's economic/sexual power and the sense that they are still in prison.

At the beginning of the third story, the narrator 'comes out': he is the writer who plays a crucial role in the tale, and we see him at last as Jean Servais. *The Model* remains, after multiple viewings, one of the most devastating quarters of an hour in the history of the cinema, but its impact is diminished if one doesn't see it in its proper place, as the culmination of the film. The male chauvinist horror story of the artist who picks up a young woman, uses her (as model, sexual partner and housekeeper), and then, when he tires of her, discards her, is banal enough in itself. The crux is that he is manipulated into discarding her by the worldly wise 'author,' whose voice has been telling us throughout how

we should view the women and relationships. It is the author's influence that directly provokes her attempted suicide. It is at this moment that (of course, with Ophüls' consent—but he was always a feminist, long before the term entered the popular vocabulary) the woman usurps the visual narration. Point-of-view shots are not unknown in Ophüls' work (see the deliberately Hitchcockian disposal-of-the-body sequence in *The Reckless Moment*), but they are extremely rare; what happens here is unique in his œuvre. As Josephine/Simone Simon rushes up the stairs, the camera (our eyes) becomes her eyes: we run to the window, fling it open, hurl ourselves into the abyss. This act of protest, privileged thus by the *mise-en-scène*, is the culmination, not just of this story, but of the entire film: Josephine becomes, at that moment, the crystallization of all the abused and exploited women who have gone before her, and our final identification-figure. The window imagery (linked to that in the *Madame Tellier* story, pointing ahead to *Madame de...*) is crucial: the woman who at last throws open the window, but in order to kill herself.

And so to *La Femme de Paul*. It is of course a great pity that the woman's protest in which *Le Plaisir* culminates—eloquent as it is—takes the form of attempted suicide (followed, in the film, by her negative power over the man—she survives, as a permanent cripple). But the original intention was to end the film with a version of one of Maupassant's most extraordinary and radical tales, far in advance not only of its time but of ours. Briefly, for those not familiar with it: A young man, Paul, insecure and uncertain of himself, has built his masculine identity on his possession of 'his' woman, Madeleine. While they are strolling in a public park by a river (the park largely peopled, like the dance hall in *The Mask*, by young women looking for husbands and prostitutes looking for customers), they see a boat full of happy, uninhibited lesbians, existing outside male definition, led by the notorious Pauline. Later, Paul finds Madeleine making love with Pauline in the shrubbery. He commits suicide. Pauline and her friends take the distraught and guilty Madeleine home, telling her 'We'll cure you.'

Obviously, this tale is capable of inflection in more than one way. So much has been demonstrated by the celebrated *auteur* who did eventually film it (sort of): that incorrigible misogynist Jean-Luc Godard, whose *Masculin-Féminin* gives us Paul, the nice, gentle, sensitive young man who listens to Mozart, betrayed by Madeleine, the shallow, superficial pop singer (has any major film so silenced or ridiculed women's voices?). The thematic content (though not the actual tale) of *La Femme de Paul* was eventually realized in a film: the admirable *Entre Nous* of Diane Kurys.

One cannot know, of course, what exactly Ophüls would have made of *La Femme de Paul*: perhaps not quite what I hope he would have made. And we would have lost the 'exposure' of the author that gives *The Model* such resonance. But I know what my ideal, 'dream' version of *Le Plaisir* is: a version where *The Model* (which is far too strong and wonderful to jettison) is followed by Ophüls' rendering of *La Femme de Paul*, introduced by the omniscient and omnipotent male author saying, 'I can't narrate the story that follows...'

# Robert Kramer

ALONG ROUTE ONE / USA

## Introduction

Along with an American tradition of maverick filmmakers who have eschewed the mainstream—Cassavetes, Nicholas Ray, Jim Jarmusch, Altman, Scorsese, Schrader—the 80s have seen an increase of an oxymoronic film genre, the self-reflexive hybrid fictional/documentary, such as *The Thin Blue Line*, *Sherman's March*, *Zelig*, *Bob Roberts*, *Someone to Love*. Forgotten for the most part, by critics and public alike, are the films of expatriate Robert Kramer, who calls himself a “countryless American abroad.”<sup>1</sup>

Born in New York in 1940, one of the founders in 1968 of *Newsreel*, a film collective, and creator of some of our most radical films since the 60s, Kramer departed for France in 1979, where he still resides. In 1989, he returned briefly to reevaluate and made *Route One/USA*, a record of a journey from Maine to Florida, which only exacerbated his self-exilic sensibility.

Here is how he describes his highly problematic body of work:

*“It is a strange and difficult work, made out of actual experience in an unusual way, and because not subject to the usual (built-in) censors of movies (a line of production like a production line, passing from stage to stage and hand to hand in a process of implicit control/rectification/control), because outside this, the movies are not only uneven, but they reflect my weaknesses as well as my strengths, my blindnesses for example, or desperation. It depends. They have a human scale which is unusual in movies (Cassavetes has this human scale for example, but, for me, even with all the effort at it, Woody Allen doesn’t).”<sup>2</sup>*

Awkward, adversarial, self-critical, at times more political about America than aesthetically compelling, Kramer’s works reflect his discomfort with his native land. If, as Lardeau claims of Kramer’s films that “the figure of an exile—which haunts every film like a second film—is nourished essentially by shadows of the past,”<sup>3</sup> then, Kramer’s interior second films reflect his literal and figurative ex-patriation from all his baleful “shadows of the past”—the dogmatic disapproval of his own father (a physician), the slick opiates of Hollywood moguls and the powerful tyranny of materialistic American leadership that contributed to the loss of the valuable tradition of civil disobedience.

### Early Films

Recognizable stylistic and thematic traits are discernible in most of Kramer's early films. A combination of documentary and fiction, of radical theater and revolutionary pedagogy à la Brecht, each film seeks resolution in the establishment of an eccentric social structure, an extended family composed of society's underprivileged minorities and rebels. *Ice*, 1969, a futuristic prediction of an American invasion of Mexico, provides a good example of how Kramer interweaves agitprop—quotations, slogans, newsreel footage—with a fictional story about the intense political activity of an insurrectionary group struggling against America in its "glacial period," its Big Chill.<sup>4</sup>

Like Cassavetes, Jean Rouch, Chris Marker, Godard, who departed from Hollywood's sleek production values, Kramer uses disruptive direct sounds, handheld cameras, natural light sources, black-and-white grainy footage. His nervy and nervous characters—non-professional actors who, as white disaffected intellectuals, are clones of the filmmaker—give an appearance of extemporarized unscripted drama and lend an air of brooding urgency to the melancholy tonality.

Inaudible or hollow voices, aslant framing devices and unexplained events produce a destabilizing feeling. The sense of a clandestine conspiratorial world is reinforced by anonymous characters appearing and disappearing without apparent motivation. The feeling of foreboding is present in many shots and is heightened by the edgy furtiveness of the characters. Shots of the back of a nameless person looking mutely and inexplicably off-screen run counter to the causal linkage of action in traditional films, thus preparing viewers for an alienating alternative experience to "pleasure"-oriented Hollywood.

From the beginning of his career, Kramer developed an editing pattern for making connections between personal microcosms and the larger political and

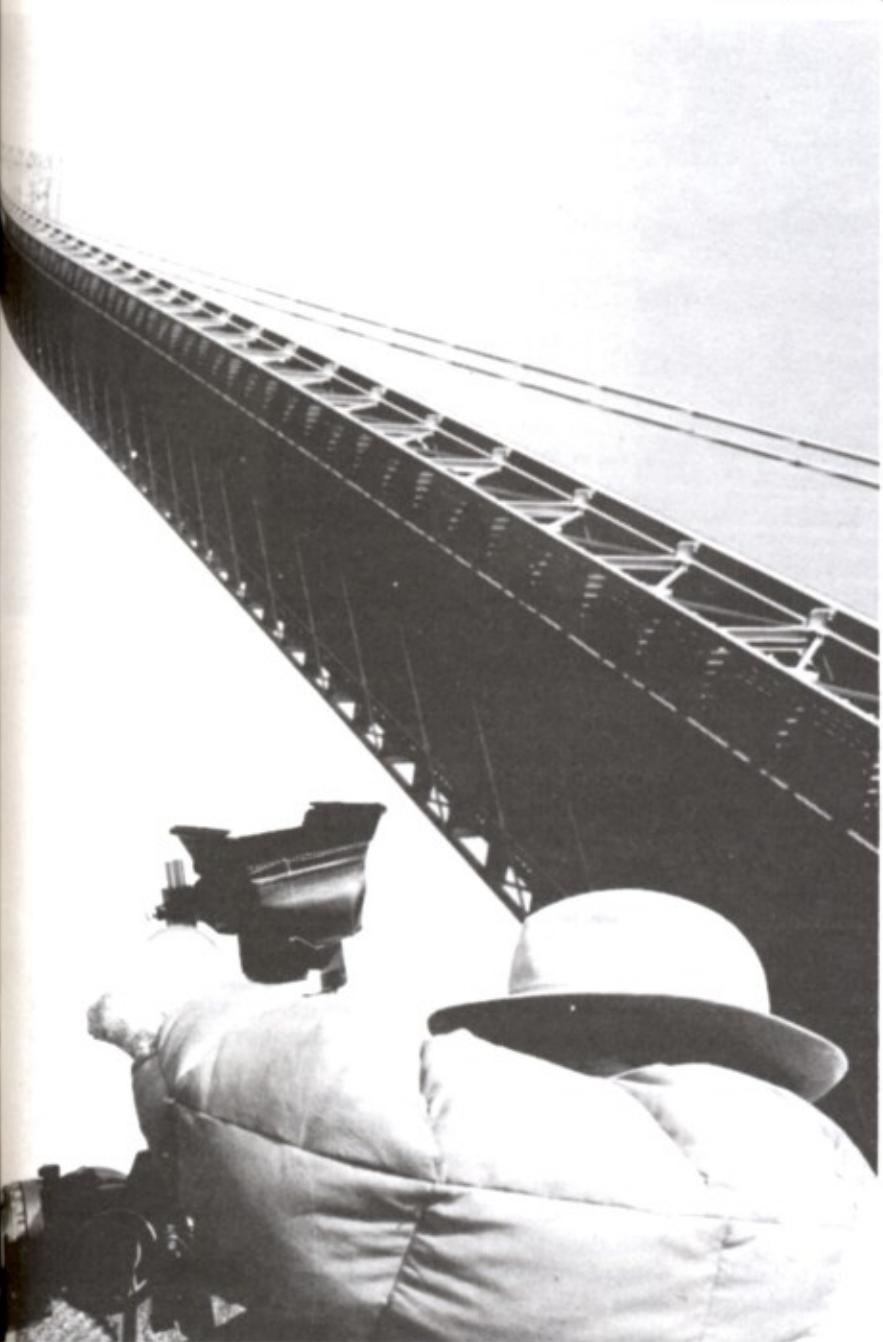
1. Kramer's description of his stateless condition: "I am completely obsessed by questions of having a country or not, of having a culture or not and what culture...I still have many stories with New York, my native city—myths which work on me all the time." Sophie D'Armillacq, "Robert Kramer, au fil de la Route One," *Liberation*, April 22, 1990, 43.

2. In a letter to the author, October 8, 1990.

3. Y. Lardeau, "A Review of Robert Kramer's *Guns*," *Cahiers du Cinema*, Dec. 1980, 51, 52.

4. See Marcel Martin, "The Glacial Period: *Ice* by Robert Kramer," *Les Lettres Françaises*, Oct. 28-Nov. 3, 1970.

by Ruth Perlmutter



Route One/USA



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social sphere, and thus, providing the motivations that propel his characters into anti-establishment behavior. A typical sequence, for example, moves from a lone individual to a couple worrying over personal concerns to a larger group, arguing and working together as a revolutionary cell, emblematic of an idealistic family of concerned humanity.

The linkage of discomforting strategies with revolutionary content provided Kramer with the means to pull away from what he called Hollywood's simplistic assertions and "perfect image." What makes the films of our major dissident documentor of the 60s compelling is the persistence with which they put into question the nature and extent of *individual* and personal commitment. In *Edge*, 1967, about a plot to assassinate the president during the Vietnam War, a narcissistic terrorist's bungled mission and eventual suicide result in the abandonment of the cause by his cell members. A major character in *Ice* rejects the mindless violence of his group and leaves in search of a more humanist radical organization.

#### **Milestones, 1975**

A sprawling quasi-ethnographic fictional documentary of life on a Vermont commune, where conscientious objectors, weathermen, homosexuals and flower-children seek refuge and fresh beginnings, *Milestones* suggests the possibility of human togetherness as effective human action. For all its denunciation of the violence and arrogance of American imperialism, for all its despair about radicals' feelings of powerlessness towards the treatment of Indians and blacks and towards the bombing of Hanoi, for all its powerful authentication of a generation's deepest convictions about society's injustices, the characters in *Milestones* focus on non-violent implementations of radical politics. A blind homosexual potter who personifies instinctual sensuality and alternative lifestyle, inspires the others to "get in touch with their feelings." A young mother goes through a prolonged birthing accompanied by the strokes and solicitations of the whole community. Instead of acting as a traditional mother to her two grown daughters, a middle-aged

woman creates a Vietnam resistance film. A discharged political prisoner tries to convince his physician-father that working for the underprivileged is as significant a profession as doctoring. He is one of the earliest Kramer surrogates defending his anti-establishment political proclivities to a conservative physician, like Kramer's own father.

The film is loosely constructed, as if catching life unawares. Without introduction, people encounter and become involved. Yet, despite the mosaic randomness and apparent improvisatory realism—reinforced by actors who themselves share radical concerns—*Milestones* has a structural framework that reappears even more forcibly in *Route One/USA*. A series of parallel sequences counterpoint documentation of American injustice with enactment of the experiences of a new breed of world "menders." The interpellation of newsreel footage of violence against oppressed minorities (blacks are hounded and lynched) is juxtaposed with dramatised communal scenes that evoke Utopian possibilities for wholeness. People are seen at work, building, using their hands—to "heal," to soothe, to create a pot, a film, a baby. Cleansing imagery of nature recur and a tour of an aquarium (a repeated sequence in a few of Kramer's films) has both a lyrical and ironic connotation. Implicit in the sea creatures' eerie mystery is the liberating recognition that we are all part of a non-hierarchical cosmic flow.

If, as implied in the title poem by Ho Chi Minh that prefacing the film, that the smallest pebble can be a significant guidepost to others, then the primary achievement of *Milestones* lies in its espousal of a new kind of class revolution—grounded in care and loving. As a character states, "Revolution is not a series of accidents but a whole life."

### European Films

Although Kramer has remained dedicated to his goals to effect change, to achieve wholeness, his films made in Europe from 1980 to 1987 do not share the optimism of *Milestones*. Reflecting what Daniel Coche termed his growing "nomadic dissidence" as a man without a country, these expatriate films are marked by a moody disquiet.<sup>5</sup>

With an even more numbing freeze than *Ice* and more precipitous edginess than *The Edge*, they take place in some dark mechanistic skewed world governed by invisible malevolent forces. Gone are the hope and solidarity of radical action. At least, in America, there was a center—oppression and injustice demanded mobilisation and the "movement" gave a surrogate family structure to fractured lives. Alienated even from group involvement, the characters in the European films are tormented by brooding guilt about their unfulfilled lives as well as their lack of total commitment to resistance.

Tony, the main character of *Guns*, 1980, a film about the immense gulf between large-scale munition deals and personal survival, is a driven political adventurer involved in a frustrating search for the source of a multi-national gun-running network.<sup>6</sup> An erstwhile radical, he is torn between personal involvement and what Kramer calls his need for "adventures to hype up his energy so that he can feel mixed up in history again." Like the filmmaker, he is drawn to an extended family of radical American expatriates—Lil, a

swimming instructor (once again, water images serve as visual metaphors for renewal); her child; a sculptor (Kramer); and Karen, returned from some repressive country where she has been tortured for revolutionary activities. Tony is also drawn to his European mistress (Juliette Berto) who makes a conscious decision to give up everything in order to nurse her dying mother. As in *Milestones*, Kramer poses the complex choices that confront people who care about personal and political matters.

Some of these concerns appear two years later in the script for *The State of Things*, directed by Wim Wenders in 1982, an amalgam of Kramer's expatriate sensibility and Wenders' own disaffections with both Hollywood and his native Germany. A group of alienated Americans and Europeans are in some otherworldly outpost by the sea. Trying to remake a futuristic end-of-the-world film, the European filmmaker, Freidrich (Patrice Bachau, who played the protagonist in *Guns*) is dependent on American finance and finds himself in a battle with his Hollywood producers who oppose his desire to make his movie in black and white. An allegorical re-enactment of Wenders' struggle with Coppola (over the film, *Hannibal*), *The State of Things* retains a great deal of Kramer's own preoccupations—an apocalyptic science fiction atmosphere, like *Ice* and *Guns*, laden with forebodings of indeterminate invisible manipulations of money and power; vague character relations; apparently random and informal fictional characters that almost play themselves (e.g., Sam Fuller as an offbeat cinematographer); self-critical characters with fragmented stories that give the film the appearance of improvisation; a consciousness about film as a means of processing personal conflict; and an ironic commercial Hollywood ending in which the filmmaker is shot while "shooting" his own death in L.A.

Freidrich's sense of statelessness that echoes Kramer's own exiled condition is symptomatic of the film's male crisis atmosphere. He has left behind (in Europe) the proverbial Kramer "cell"—a film "collective/family"—and he wanders around throughout the film claiming mournful quotes, such as: "He has no home to which he could ever go back" (from Alan LeMay's *The Searchers*); or "Remember, I'm at home nowhere, in no house, in no country" (from a letter by German film director, F. W. Murnau).

The filmic self-consciousness of *The State of Things* represented a refinement of Kramer's previous preoccupations with the incorporation of films within films. In *Ice*, the alternation of documentary footage with a fictional story linked film-making (film—"work") to political action. All through *Milestones*, a resistance film is in the making, and the movie itself ends untraditionally with a discussion about unused rushes.

Two years after *The State of Things*, Kramer made *Our Nazi*, 1984, a curious and compelling film-within-film that

5. Daniel Coche, "An American in Paris: Robert Kramer," *Cinemaction* n. 56, July, 1990, 124-129.

6. "All my stories are about arms. Behind all words today arms are hidden. A good title for the film (*Guns*) could have been *In the Shadow of Arms*." Serge LePeron, "Entretien Avec Robert Kramer," *Cahiers du Cinema*, Nov. 1980, VI.

extended his notions of the complex and complicit interrelationship between film, history, politics and reality. *Our Nazi* was actually two films. Kramer's film is in the act of being made on the set of the making of a documentary film by Thomas Harlan (guilt-ridden son of a well-known Nazi director, Viet Harlan). Kramer shoots Harlan filming an interview with an erstwhile Nazi SS commander, who, true to his former discipline, acquiesces to Harlan's fascistic browbeating interrogation. The fascination of the double film lies in its exposure of the shocking banality of the aging unrepentant Nazi. The involitional levels of father/son relationships, interaction between two piggybacking film crews, off-screen invocation of the monstrosities of the past and the terrorism inherent in the extraction of "truth," reinforce the symbiotic connections between filmmaker and subject, film and life.

In all of Kramer's films, the interweaving of film and life were extensions of the director and his fictional agents. In *Ice*, the actors were "movement" associates and, to protect them from their underground activities in real life, they remained unnamed in the fiction and the credits. In *Milestones*, Kramer, his wife and daughter, his co-director, Douglas, took secondary roles, while well-known radical figures like Grace Paley and the Stones (the producers of the film as well) enacted scripted parts that were more or less like their personalities, if not their own life-stories (à la Eisenstein's notions of typage). In fact, Kramer stated that because they were non-actors, "the problem of authenticity was very strong...they had trouble saying things they didn't believe."<sup>7</sup>

With *Doc's Kingdom*, 1987, where exile is both an internal and exterior malaise, Kramer further refined filmmaker-character surrogate relationships. He created an autobiographical counterpart, a physician named Doc, who shares both his leftwing melancholia and his missionary goals. *Doc's Kingdom*, like *Guns* and *The State of Things*, expresses a growing disenchantment with Europe. There is no asylum from the inhumanity of the invisible power of international money. Former weatherman-bad boy in the USA, Doc has knocked around revolutions in Africa and Europe and finally surfaces down-and-out in Portugal. A lonely alcoholic and a Doctor-manqué, he lives at the edge of a wasteland. In fact, in contrast with Kramer's propensity in earlier films for water motifs that are suggestive of liberation, Doc usually appears in a deserted waterfront setting filled with rusting detritus, a dump of chains, rails, fences and assorted claustrophobic barriers.

Dethroned—his kingdom a dungeon—and defrocked—no longer able to use traditional healing therapies—Doc is a composite of all the Kramer characters who have tried to deal holistically with personal and social problems. Uncomfortable in his expatriation, his passé leftist politics (he is terrorised by Portuguese rebels, who consider him a Yankee enemy), his self-flagellated ego (yearning for wholeness through healing others), and his oedipal struggle (he is confronted one day by his abandoned son), Doc is more than an alter ego of Kramer. He embodies two problematic figures that have haunted Kramer and who have reappeared as tentative characters in previous films. Doc is both

the father who cannot assume a responsible paternity (that is, be a "real" father) and the frustrated rebellious son whose radical goals never won his father's approval.

#### Route One/USA

"Eventually, all these movies I make will make up one long film. One 'story' in a continuous process of becoming: the detailed account of a consciousness moving through time and place, trying to survive, to understand, trying to find an appropriate home, and throughout it all living with images, with film-form, as the one continuous practice that unified this project."<sup>8</sup>

*Route One/USA*, 1989, is Kramer's latest pæn to the struggles of minorities while one kind of America is still engaged in a "Civil War" against the other. Europe no longer a haven, Kramer is ready to resume his "long love affair" with "what you are inevitably a part of and what you are forever outside."<sup>9</sup> Like Virgil, the filmmaker hauls himself and Doc out of moribund stagnation, and together, they embark for the USA on a mission of reevaluation. In that eternal cycle of ups and downs that is characteristic of most odysseys, they have always had hopes and fears about the inevitable return. Not because of nostalgia but as a back-to-origins learning adventure for two exiles in search of themselves and the dream of America. Nor is it a return to record superficial experiences, although, as Kramer described it, the film is structured by "the desire to consume everything, to talk with no matter who, to accumulate details that belong to sociology and journalism."<sup>10</sup> It is, rather, an interior voyage into the sensibility of a country—its images, sounds, feelings, faces, icons and myths. The incorporation of a character who is a hyperbolized double of his maker and who encounters with him real people in real American places, heightens the film's underlying confrontation with the "other," the double or the shadow that America fears, rejects, indeed denies.<sup>11</sup>

This time, Doc (Paul Mclsaac) travels along the East Coast of the USA accompanied by his director who is only heard off-screen, as "Robert," the cameraman. Doc and "Robert," therefore, work together in tandem as two "characters" with prior shared experiences and attitudes about the loss of American values.

By entering his own film as a man with a movie camera who accompanies a recycled fictional physician, Kramer extends the medical metaphor implicit in *Doc's Kingdom* to filmmaking. It becomes an explicit remedial instrument for taking the pulse of America's symptoms of illness, the wasted lives of America's omnipresent "others" (unemployed blacks, neglected native Americans, maladapted immigrants).

The invention of a transgressive double presence, the filmmaker as an off-screen cinematographer accompanying his characters, dismantles traditional notions of character formation and documentary objectivity, while also reinforcing the parallels between the director-as-cameraman and his fictional alter ego. Like Kramer, Doc is reflective, uncertain, ambivalent. Abdicating orthodox medicine and its conven-

tions, he dresses in working clothes—like a docker or a woodsman—and no job is beneath his attention. With a social worker's missionary zeal, he is always pitching in—sweeping the floor, ladling soup to the homeless, teaching first aid in an inner city school.<sup>12</sup> Although the attitudes appear to be his, they also reflect Kramer's admirations (for Whitman, Thoreau) and compassion (for blacks, political immigrants, pro-choicers).<sup>13</sup>

Yet, Doc is no ordinary scripted nor tintype replica. As Kramer stated, Paul "inhabited" his role so completely that he developed, indeed "invented" his own interests. A couple of times, as if in opposition to the film project and to events that become physically unendurable for him, he splits. Thus, when he goes off to a soup kitchen in Connecticut instead of investigating the mores of rightwing church groups with "Robert," he voices his disapproval...of his companion *and* his director. According to Kramer, it was as if he had actually said to "Robert": "I want to touch and heal people, not visit fundamentalists."<sup>14</sup>

Ostensibly a journey along the East Coast (our first frontier, our first road) and the megalopolis highway that runs from Maine to Florida, *Route One/USA* is an exploration of where Kramer, Doc and America all began—the first traces, the first immigrants, the first wars, indeed, the start of all the promise and the failures (oppression, inequities). In the four hours that follow across the spine of early America, each affirmation of freedom, each national icon, is paralleled by a critical disparity. In the first shots, Doc is disembarking

7. The author's interview with Robert Kramer, July, 1990, at the La Rochelle Film Festival, 1990.

8. Robert Kramer describing his films for the circulation of his films by the Museum of Modern Art, 1989.

9. Robert Kramer, "A Note," *Press Kit for Doc's Kingdom*, Paris, Sept. 1988.

10. *Liberation*, April, 1990.

11. "40 million blacks and American denies its racist problem." *Liberation*.

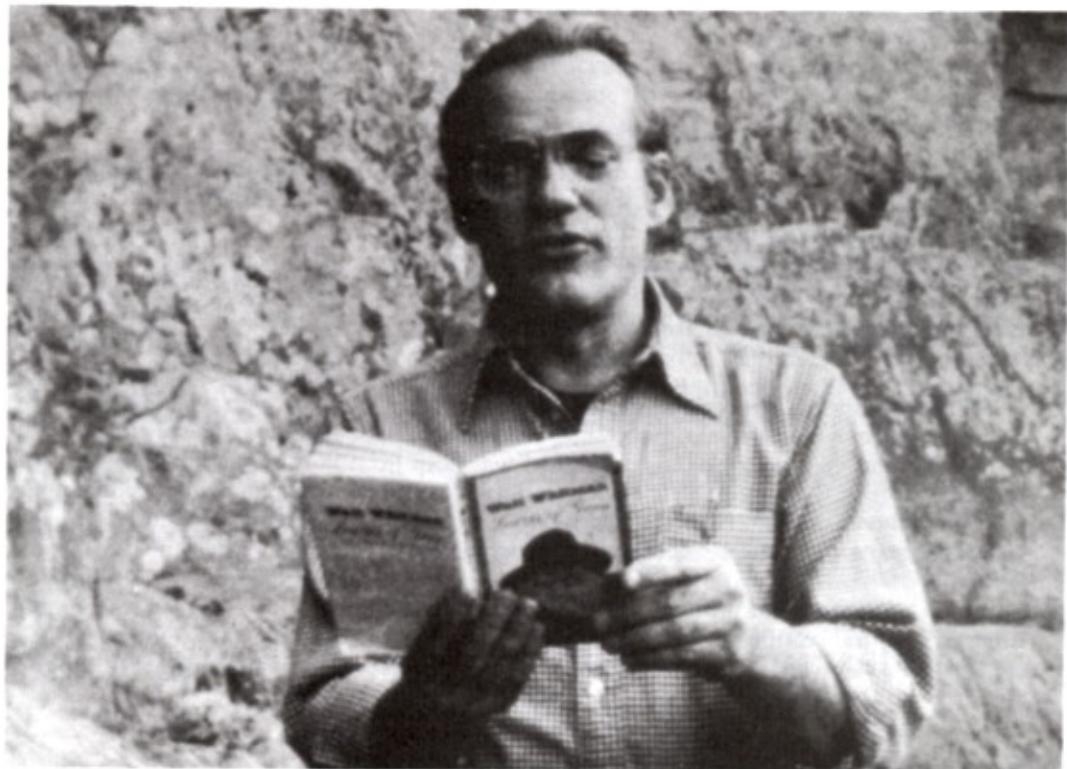
12. In his interview with the author, Kramer stated that Doc was the same kind of character as Paul McIsaac had played in *Ice*—underground, crazy but tired of violence. Once adopting the mantle of a physician-character, McIsaac went to learn about doctoring and the source book that they used for the development of his character was John Berger's *A Fortunate Man* (1967, Holt, Rhinehart). Kramer stated that Berger's description was "close to our ideas about healing."

In Berger's book, a country doctor who works in an underprivileged community is described as the patient's ideal brother who touches his patients while talking and listening to them. Indeed, he actually "becomes" the patient because he is in many ways an actor himself, able to assume others' costumes and habits. These qualities cause his own depression and deep sense of inadequacy, not only because he suffers with the patient, but because all doctors "live in and accept a society which is incapable of knowing what a human life is worth," (156) and is equally incapable of measuring those who ease and sometimes save a life.

13. According to Kramer (in his interview with the author), Paul McIsaac, once himself a radical militant, now conducts "Future" seminars" where he stimulates people to think about the future and possible utopian futures, in the belief that our dreams can have an effect on our present life.

14. Interview with author.

*Route One/USA*





Route One/USA

at New York City with his face in extreme but unfocussed closeup, partially blocking a full view of the Statue of Liberty, as if to put into question the aspirations for the sheltering of "huddled masses." Accompanied by Kramer's sober off-screen voice, these shots enunciate the obsessions with naming, first things, re-experiences and new beginnings that propel the journey and the film:

"That's the doctor. We decided to come together...coming back was what we said, not home, but back, back there behind you, your origins, the start. I was born in the shadow of the Empire State Building...I didn't want to start there. Let's go North, I said to Doc...to where Route 1 starts...to the states of our growing up. Let's go."

The next sequences juxtapose a joyous immersion in America's natural beauties as well as its imperfections. As if engaged in a baptismal rite, Doc swims nude in a Maine

rapids and then recites Whitman's "Song of the Open Road." When asked by "Robert" why he chose that passage, Doc replies: "Because he talks about the America I love. There's the other America down the road there and I felt like I needed something to hold up against it."

The "other America" keeps cropping up. It persists in the sadness of wasted lives in an all-black inner-city elementary school; in the deplorable conditions in a city hospital; in a boot camp where recruits are given inspirational pep talks that are euphemistic motivations for killing; at the Vietnam War Memorial, caressing the names of the dead; and commiserating with Haitian immigrants trying to eke out a bare existence. Punctuating each calumny are the mournful echoes of the America Doc loves—Thoreau's enunciation of civil disobedience and John Brown's denunciation of slavery. Interspersed throughout are inspirational moments, shots of the country's visual splendors, people at work—logging, fishing, building, carving out little oases—and

montages of the open road, sky, highway ramps and bridges (symbols of the connections between human beings).

Mostly, there is Doc, forever talking—to people along the way, to "Robert," to himself—about choices, about paths not taken. In one section, Doc stands reverently in Thoreau's small retreat at Walden Pond, cut to a wordless sequence at a factory assembly line grinding out the fake money and miniature hotel chips of "Monopoly"; then cut to Boston Commons, where a pre-historic camp site was found; and finally, juxtaposed with shots of bizarre fish in an aquarium (Kramer's repeated motif for natural affinities), Doc appears in his medical costume, while "Robert" assures him off-screen:

"Of course, the world is strange. Of course, when you see families it's natural to have a heavy feeling. You made other choices, different compensations, life under the surface, beyond the ordinary."

In other words, anecdotal illustrations and personal meditations reinforce the theme of the film, that for caring people, aware of the external forces that affect them, American history and society have exacted painful, often destructive choices.

Doc, however, needs constant encouragement for the road he has taken "beyond the ordinary," and he actually breaks down after a series of redneck sequences. A born-again preacher proclaims that children are born sinners and "must pay for their rebellion," and a fundamentalist teaches his naive family that "Jesus never breaks a promise." An anti-abortion group carries signs that say "Jesus loves the unborn children." At a rightwing campaign party, candidate Pat Robertson spouts moral platitudes and in church, the town minister states that South African riots only concern blacks against blacks and are provoked by communists. As if in horrified response to the accumulation of reified homilies and prejudices, Doc's own reality suddenly fades. He is seen framed and reflected in glass, and in tense anxiety, he half-whispers:

"Everything's changed and nothing's changed. I've been gone 10 years and I'm pacing as if I've been in jail 10 years. The Civil War is still going on."

The scenes thereafter demonstrate the continuing presence of a civil conflict in America. The method of parallel sequencing reaches a climax when the two reach Connecticut. People break bread together in a soup kitchen. A Cuban social worker describes her devotion to the poor. A black politician on a radio talk show begs a racist caller "to give us a chance." Black kids play outside their bullet-ridden school. In contrast, a benevolent heir to a real estate and industrial empire proudly surveys his realm from a helicopter—expanded banks, 14-acre shopping malls and hazardous waste processing plants—while an empathetic prosecutor of juvenile delinquents walks around his suburban wooded property, stating that he has to put out of his mind by "sheer will power" the hopeless state of the underclass he deals with every day. Meanwhile, in an inner-city hospital, Doc confesses to colleagues that in Africa he nearly

destroyed himself with alcohol and drugs, trying to persevere in his healing mission in the face of staggering deprivation. In response, a social worker describes their own "slow war, not a clear cut one—of attrition and disease." America's sickness, its ongoing domestic discontent, its unassimilated immigrant population overflows a "hole in the dike that's bigger than our finger."

As they approach New York where Kramer was born and raised, his off-screen voice takes over. In the very center of the film, he replaces Doc and reveals his most significant personal memory. At the desk of the New York Public Library, the unseen Kramer orders a well-loved book that he remembers from his childhood, *The Little Red Lighthouse* (perched under the George Washington Bridge). As he turns the pages, he whispers emotionally: "My children's book. My education. My text." Like the significance of the smallest pebble which provides the eloquent title for *Milestones*, the tiny lighthouse still casts its narrow beam valiantly persisting in its life-saving mission—persevering against overwhelming odds, just as Kramer envisions his life and work.

With the children's story triggering memories, Kramer recalls his father's attempts to influence his future. He, as the protesting son, responded: "I can't do it from your experience. I'm not you. I'm me. The situations I face aren't yours. The world's changed. It's all different now." As the camera swoops away from a guided tour of the lighthouse and over a residential area where his father might have grown up, Kramer sadly muses on his father's own aspirations as a doctor to "make the world a better place," and how these regrettably changed as he grew older. The mournful autobiographical sequence ends with the words, "We never got on with it, he and I."<sup>15</sup>

In this personal father-son encounter, Kramer has revealed the oedipal origins of his mission as an advocate of the unfortunate and the powerless marginal people of the world. The two buddies on the road are always alert to that invisible forsaken "other" America. Responsibility for it is their major preoccupation and the film is rhythmically structured to reiterate that profound concern.<sup>16</sup>

After the library sequence, the two move South, touching down at Constitution Hall and the Liberty Bell, then on to Washington with a crosscut between a Hispanic woman learning English, trying to become visible in America, and Doc at the Vietnam War Memorial, which "Robert" describes as "one of the few talking stones we have." Doc begins to break down noticeably as he touches the names. Almost crying, he says goodbye to a bunch of buddies remembering how he tried to stop them from going. Off-screen, "Robert" professes his own discomfort about those times, and again, his sense of not having done enough.<sup>17</sup>

15. Despite the awful findings his father made on a Hiroshima medical mission, years later, much to his son's horror, he advocated the use of the bomb in Korea.

16. In the *Liberation* interview, Kramer stated the "responsibility is the permanently provoked dialogue" between himself and Doc. It is also what makes him question the distancing act of filming, which can avoid defining, resolving and acting on 'responsibility.'

17. "I felt guilty about Doc's war experience and that I hadn't gone to war." *Liberation*.

For a while, the problem of responsibility erodes the relationship between Doc and "Robert." Making a film is too passive an instrument for rectifying the ills of America. When he decides to leave the film again, Doc says: "I have to go back...to do what I do. Instead of being an observer, I want to melt into a community." In fact, when Doc does return—at the end of the film, at the end of U.S. Route One—he has decided to stay in Florida working as an underpaid doctor with America's newest group of struggling immigrants, the Haitians.<sup>18</sup>

On one level, then, Kramer has set his character free to heal third world America. Doc's leaving marks a critical juncture in the film. His abandonment of the film project and his role as an actor, his rejection of Kramer's cinematic re-examination of America, his desire to return to "real" life, appears to upset the delicate balance of control between filmmaker and actor, between film and life. Yet, on another level, as *Kramer's construction*, Doc's independence is symptomatic of Kramer's perennial discomfort at the inherent conflict between responsible action to contribute to the global community and the distancing mechanisms of filmmaking and character construction.<sup>19</sup>

With his alter ego ensconced in a pocket of dystopia, still hoping to make a difference, "Robert" ends as he begins, at sea and at an edge of the continent. In a glorious climax of image-sound parallels, there is an alternation of ironic shots of the sign "End of the Rainbow, End of the Route, Unlimited Opportunities," with the American flag waving beside a voting center and an almost relentless repetition of activities near a marina that announce Kramer's return to his role as exile and observer. Aslant images of the ocean, boats, a drawbridge lifting up and down, concrete pillars under a causeway and a weather balloon sent aloft are accompanied by a series of sea sounds—the whistling wind and the creakings of ships as they push and pull against heavy cables and ropes, expressing Kramer's yearning to set off.<sup>20</sup>

The last shot of the film, taken under a glass-bottom tourist boat and accompanied by a guide's explanation of how coral reefs share one digestive system, echoes Kramer's fondness for using aquariums and water imagery to represent natural origins, the interdependency of all creatures, and a sense of the age of the universe. For him, this ending both suggests that "If we ruin a part of that mass of coral, the rest will die" and reinforces his belief that Americans live in "intellectual and imaginative isolation because we have no sense of the other."<sup>21</sup> It also recalls an earlier sequence in the film where a forestry agent is describing the disease of a chestnut tree—"It kills its own homeland, kills itself where it lives."

When questioned about the significance of the aquarium and similar sequences, Kramer affirmed that he consciously developed what he called a "geological" rhythm in the film. His aim, he stated, was to connect "mood-ideas" about geological time and its contrast with the human perspective in order to give a visual sense of the changes in America. Zooming in on a children's playground where Indians once traded and then on to a shot of an aquarium produces what he calls "idea-image packages" that accumulate poetic associations about how our country was built and how we live in and on the land.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusion

The 60s revolution sprang from the protest movement against the war in Vietnam. It became a youth movement that spread to France and China and probably influenced events in Eastern Europe in the 60s that climaxed in the recent widespread revolutions of liberation.

Kramer was totally possessed by this new spirit that challenged society's delivered verities. It resonated with his own value system, derived from his American and Jewish forebears, resulting in a profound dedication to peace, to "the family of man," to the equitable distribution of wealth, and to the protection of the environment. To express these beliefs and to take action in their service, he chose to be a filmmaker of commitment.

Gradually, he developed his own hybrid style to resist the manipulation inherent in establishment moviemaking. Influenced by the blurring of the distinction between documentary and fiction pioneered by Godard, *Route One/USA* is a road-buddy movie grafted onto a documentary about the state of freedom and human rights in contemporary America. Kramer's bittersweet reevaluation of prevailing American myths of regeneration (that there is a free open road and an unpolluted frontier away from civilization's discontents) is grounded in his disappointment with America for not fulfilling the promise proclaimed in the words at the base of the Statue of Liberty. His presentation of the case for the deprived, the oppressed and exploited, and his almost naive idealistic fantasy that the world could be one family, one well body, come as much from the American liberal tradition of Thoreau, Whitman and Lincoln Steffens as from ancient messianic Jewish aspirations to mend the world. Like the tiny beacon of the lighthouse, he has chosen to keep his small light shining and thin small voice (in Hebrew, "Kol dmama daka") calling on the conscience of the world to promote justice and the quality of life.

Thanks to Jean-Luk Passek for the presentation of Robert Kramer's films at the La Rochelle Film Festival 1990.

18. "One is finally better on the edge with people who pose other questions, who have another culture and who probably will never acculturate in America." *Liberation*.

19. Kramer has described how the author ultimately triumphs. Referring to himself as if another fictional character in his film, he said:

"When Robert and Doc separate, when he leaves, I used my power as cineaste to evacuate him, precisely in order to have that liberty. With that blow, his status changed completely. From a doctor, he becomes an actor..." *Liberation*.

20. According to Kramer, the sea imagery and the weather balloon at the end relate back to the boats and airplanes in the beginning, and all have to do with his restlessness. He states: "I only feel truly good in moving, no matter what I use to escape." *Liberation*.

21. *Liberation*.

22. Interview with author.

RADICAL FILM CRITICISM AND THEORY

# cineACTION

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# HOMEWORK TIMES THREE

by Robin Wood

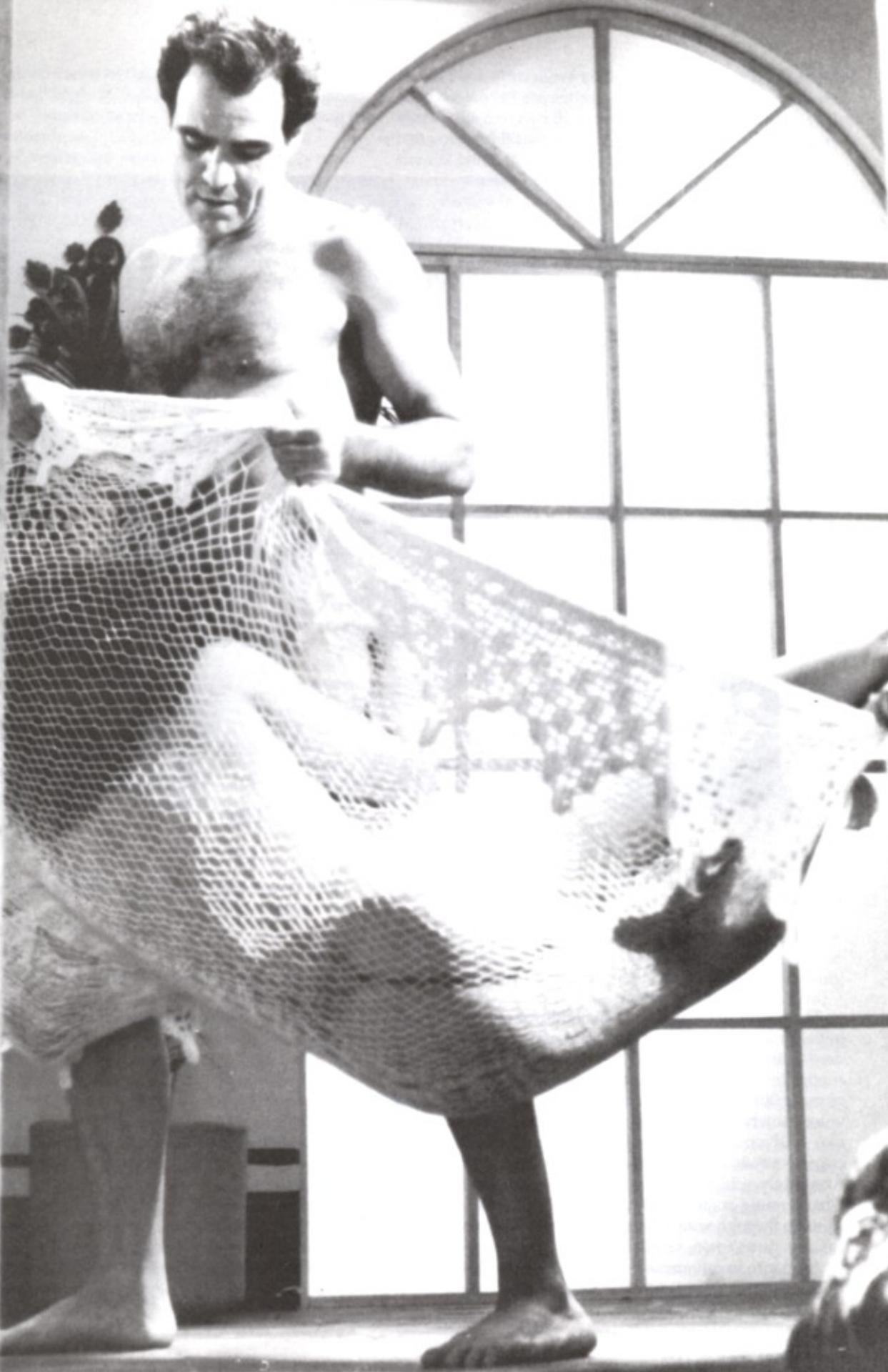
When Jaime Humberto Hermosillo's *La Tarea* (*Homework*) was shown in the 1991 Toronto Film Festival, the theatre was packed, people were turned away, and the film was greeted with delighted laughter and a prolonged ovation. Why no enterprising distributor immediately snapped it up will remain, for me, one of the mysteries of film distribution in Canada: the film might well have made somebody's fortune (it still might).

Previously, the problem would have been censorship, for under the notorious Mary Brown régime that made Ontario an international laughing stock the film would almost certainly have been banned (it is strictly impossible to cut it, for reasons intrinsic to its method that will become obvious later). But censorship as previously practised had just been disbanded: the exact moment, one would have thought, when our entrepreneurs would have been on the lookout for a film that was at once highly erotic, hilariously funny, and a cinematic tour-de-force.

*La Tarea* was followed in 1992 by *La Tarea Prohibida*, an even finer film which is at once more deeply shocking and much less funny, thereby less obviously a crowd-pleaser. It undoubtedly deserves the international distribution it probably won't get: ideally, it needs to be seen in close association with the previous film, and they would make a wonderful double-bill. Better still, a triple-bill, because *La Tarea* was not the beginning: there is an earlier *La Tarea*, shot on video and playing for a minute under an hour, with which I have been familiar for some years, from a video cassette sent me by Hermosillo. Each film is self-contained, and a great pleasure in itself, but their delights are multiplied when one sees them as a series, as variations on a theme: the play of sameness and difference is endlessly fascinating, all three sharing an identical structure that highlights the radical divergences, giving different meanings to identical incidents.

[Note: Any reader who believes that s/he will have the opportunity—somehow, somewhere—of seeing one or more of the films should read no further: their pleasures depend partly on surprise twists that, if I am to discuss them further, I shall be forced to reveal. It is not impossible that someone with just a modicum of sense, imagination and business acumen will buy them, at least for release on video, which is in fact, given their thematic/formal content, not an inappropriate medium.]

*La Tarea* (35 mm. version).





Jaime Humberto Hermosillo directing *La Tarea* (Homework).

The 'identical structure' can be outlined quite simply: the initial premise (as it turns out, a *false* premise) is that a student taking a film course has been assigned a homework the condition of which is that it be a video running for one hour or more filmed without a single cut. The student sets up the video camera and invites an ex-lover, a one- (or possibly two- or three-...) night stand, to the apartment in order to engage in seduction and intercourse before the camera. Around the midpoint of the film the lover suddenly realizes what is going on, rebels, leaves, then returns, having decided to go through with it. They make love. The lover leaves again, returns again, revealing that the two set up the whole performance in conjunction, and in fact have a permanent relationship. It is only at this point (almost at the end) that

the films diverge in structure: in the first two, the couple have made a 'porno' movie to rescue the family economy; in the third, the film is destroyed.

To be frank, my problem in discussing the films is that they are so slippery—by which I don't mean evasive: Hermosillo is an extremely playful, mischievous, humorous artist, but also (and often simultaneously) a deeply serious, passionate and committed one. I mean simply that there are so many layers, so many issues to discuss: the play with the audience (never malicious or condescending—we are not in David Lynch territory, we are never 'put down' as fools but invited into an egalitarian complicity); the 'pornography vs. eroticism' debate; the Renoiresque (or Minnelli-esque, or Cukoresque—all three, significantly, are among Hermosillo's

favourite directors) theme of the relationship between 'being' and 'acting.' I shall begin by indicating the major differences, both formal and dramatic, among the three films, referring to them for convenience as T1, T2, and T3.

After a brief credits shot, whose purpose is simply to show the hidden camera being set up, T1 does indeed consist of a single take, approximately 58 minutes long; the video camera becomes our eyes, and we see, precisely, the 'pro-filmic event,' the 'homework' that it records, and nothing else. When the lover discovers it and, furious, tips it on its side, we see the action at 90° angle until it is righted again. This strict formal purity is the great asset of the first film, the unity of time and space preserved without recourse to illusion. T2 repeats the conceit of showing everything in continuity as if through the lens of the video camera, but, as the film was actually shot on 35 mm with its 10-minute limit on takes, this had to be faked, with a number of concealed cuts achieved by giving the actors various pretexts to leave the frame, leaving an 'empty space' that could be easily matched. I don't think one can argue that this enhances the film by adding yet a further level of artifice. It is merely a distracting technical necessity: after a while, one begins trying to anticipate how the characters will be manipulated into vacating the frame, and trying to perceive the almost imperceptible changes in light or print quality that 'give away' the cut. That aside, T2 is generally the better film—funnier, more erotic, more fully worked, though without any sense of padding (it's about thirty minutes longer than T1). T3 abandons the conceit, still employing very long takes (a Hermosillo trademark from the beginning of his career), but allowing the camera freedom of viewpoint and perspective: of the three films, it is the one that would suffer most on the small screen, as it plays frequently with the distinction between 35 mm film stock and the video image. It also adds a new, legitimate dimension to the 'Chinese box' of appearance/illusion/artifice/reality by opening with a prologue in which we see Hermosillo preparing to shoot the film we are about to see.

T2 is a fairly close remake of T1, all the differences but one deriving from its 'feature' length and the shift to 35 mm. The 'one' is, however, crucial, transforming everything: even identical lines of dialogue take on quite different connotations. In T1 it is a male student who is doing the homework, filming an (apparently) unsuspecting woman; T2 reverses the sexes. (It also enlists María Rojo, who seems, at least in memory, to be the star of virtually every Mexican movie screened in the Toronto Festival over the last couple of years. As the star not only of both T2 and T3 but of such strong and distinguished films as *Red Sunrise* and *La Danzón*, she appears to be a central presence in the remarkable Mexican film renaissance, her personality and versatility quite collapsing the familiar actor/star dichotomy.) As the action and dialogue, though expanded, are very close to the original, the differences are of quite a subtle nature and arise spontaneously from the differences in social position and the spectator's recognition of them: the difference, for example, between a woman discovering that she has been exploited by a man, and a man discovering that he has been exploited by a woman.

All three films move toward the revelation that not only have the *actors* been acting—the *characters* have been acting also. In the first two films they are husband and wife, with two young children, making a porn movie ostensibly to bolster the family finances, and each film culminates in their announcement, to the cinema audience, of the film's full title: 'Homework; or, How Pornography Saved the Partida Family from Boredom, and Saved Their Economy.' Yet the films continuously raise the question of what is 'acting' and what is 'real.' Most obviously, it is raised by the sex act itself. In both films the lovers' (or spouses') intercourse is partly concealed: in the first, a veil is flung over the video camera, making the image tantalizingly indistinct; in the second, the lovemaking takes place in a hammock, slung across the living room at a distance from the camera. Both on the level of the fiction and the level of reality, we cannot be sure whether the sex act (which looks very convincing) was or was not simulated (the usual distinction between 'soft-core' and 'hard-core'): was Hermosillo making a hard-core movie in which the actors have sex on screen? Or was he making a soft-core movie about a husband and wife making a hard-core movie? Or about a husband and wife making a soft-core movie? Did (on whatever level, reality or fiction) the 'acting' of sexual activity arouse actual desire? Was the masquerade of a one-night stand a necessary device for the renewal of the married couple's sexual excitement in each other? When does 'acting' become 'fantasy,' and what role does it play in actual lives? The films do not presume to answer such questions (they can be read as suggesting that they are unanswerable), but they raise the issue in a highly complex way.

Closely connected with this is their engagement with recent debates about pornography—especially the question of whether a clear distinction can be made between the 'pornographic' and the 'erotic.' Such an attempted distinction usually takes the form (perhaps the only one possible) of defining pornography strictly in terms of exploitation, specifically the exploitation of women. The 'erotic' film would be one in which none of the participants, male or female, was exploited or objectified. If one accepts this (it is not without problems, such as the question of whether filming a naked human body automatically objectifies it for the viewer, and whether, if that is the case, there are acceptable modes of objectification), then one could say that the young man in T1 sets out (or, more strictly, *appears* to set out) to make a 'pornographic' film (because he is using the woman without her knowledge) and ends up making an 'erotic' one (because, after she learns the truth, the woman eventually decides to accept the 'assignment,' in full knowledge and on equal terms). When we learn that they are in fact a married couple and that both were complicit from the start, we may reflect that what they have made is an 'erotic' film for themselves and a 'pornographic' film for the audience to whom it will be shown for money. The question then remains of the nature of the film Hermosillo has made: 'erotic' or 'pornographic'? On the level of filmic presentation, the completely static, unblinking camera (it is only in a very limited sense 'our eyes' because we are continually aware of it as a mechanical recording device) and the distance of the action

from it guarantee that there can be no objectification of one body in relation to the other. And Hermosillo, one may add, has been throughout his career one of the very few directors in the world consistently to equalize male and female nudity.

The basic structure, and these same thematic concerns, are all resumed and developed in T3; yet the more I think about the film (which there has been no opportunity to see a second time) the greater the differences become. It is not just a difference of tone, though that is what strikes one through the first three-quarters of the film: a deepening and a darkening (the latter also literal, as most of the film takes place outside at night, on a roof garden instead of in a brightly lit interior, and the characters are surrounded by darkness beyond the reach of the lights). To put it more precisely, one realizes in retrospect that the change in tone (not absolute—much of the film remains very funny, though our laughter is far more muted and qualified) is dictated by the change in the ultimate revelation: that the 'lovers' are not husband and wife but mother and son, and the woman is committing both incest and adultery.

The shock is greater, of course, if you've already seen T2 and are anticipating the same, relatively comfortable, dénouement. The subject-matter is obviously very 'touchy,' but especially so (I guess) for heterosexual males: the only (mini-)review I read of the film during its Toronto exposure dismissed it as merely a stale repetition of the previous film, completely sidestepping the kind of confrontation it proposes. (The woman with whom I watched it—our own Florence Jacobowitz—on the other hand loved the film and felt no need to 'block' its content.) For males who have passed 'successfully' through the Oedipal trajectory most families impose on them, mother-son incest must carry a particularly terrifying emotional charge. The revelation in the first two films, though it gives a new dimension to the acting/reality theme, remains something of a gimmick, though not incongruent with the films' light tone: a clever and amusing surprise 'twist,' there mainly for its own sake. In retrospect, the revelation in T3 comes across as a logical necessity, carefully prepared yet a complete surprise, no longer a clever twist but the film's real subject. It is necessary here, not arbitrary, that the knowledge of the couple's true relationship be withheld: we have to accept—indeed, *desire*—the lovemaking before we learn that what we have witnessed is the breaking of our culture's ultimate taboo. The film subtly erodes any resistance we might feel to the fulfilment of erotic desire between a very young man and a much older woman (a woman quite evidently 'old enough to be his mother')—the acceptance made easier for us by the fact that the more obvious desire is on the young man's side, so there is no question of youth being exploited. When we learn the truth, we understand that the breaking of the taboo is no more (and no less) than the realization of the 'normal' (though forbidden) desire of the heterosexual male in patriarchal culture: the son becomes (for a moment) 'the Father,' without undergoing 'castration.' And, as we have both accepted and desired the sexual act, it is somewhat difficult for us abruptly to condemn it.

The themes of the first two films return, but not automatically or inertly: everything is deepened and developed,

everything is pervaded and darkened by intimations of pain, past or imminent, and the change of tone is thoroughly explained by the film's underlying tension, the tension between what is desired and what is permitted, the tension within the desire the culture simultaneously nurtures and condemns. It is important that the son is not a substitute/rival for the mother's actual husband (who is his stepfather, clearly one of the reasons why he doesn't live 'at home') but an illusory replacement for the now idealized (and dead) husband of the past, the young man's real father. The acting/reality theme takes on a whole new dimension. We know from the beginning of the film (Hermosillo preparing the 'shoot') that everything in it is acted. Yet, within the fiction, acting and reality become indissolubly fused. In what is felt at the time (and the feeling proves to be correct) as the film's crucial scene, the mother describes to her son (long before we know what their relationship is, but after the point where, in the fiction within the fiction, she has grasped and accepted that everything is being filmed) her experience of watching *The Quiet Man* and seeing her dead husband (his father) as John Wayne. As she narrates the experience she progressively (and completely convincingly) breaks down; then, immediately after it, she asks whether the camera was turned on, afraid it might have missed her great moment. The effect is not, ultimately, cynical: rather that she needed the pretext of 'acting' in order to be able to reveal the 'reality'—and, we subsequently realize, in order to be able to recount it, and communicate the affect, to her own son. (And given how convincing the performance is, what can we say about Maria Rojo's 'acting' here? Certainly, that it is 'virtuoso.' But isn't one possible definition of great acting the actor's ability actually to *experience* the emotions that are being conveyed?)

All three films make more sense if we assume that sexual intercourse really does take place (at least on the level of the fiction!). But I think we are more fully convinced of this in T3, both at the time and retrospectively, from the mother's reaction. In the first two films the 'homework' is successfully completed: if it were *really* a student and *really* an assignment, we would be certain that s/he got an 'A+', for sheer nerve if nothing else, and in the 'reality' within the fiction we are happy that the husband and wife both enjoyed themselves and subsidized their income. The ending of T3 permits no feelings of satisfaction: even the mother's self-consolation that the experience was an important stage in her son's education is tentative and bleak, and leaves her precisely back where she was, with the addition of a burden of guilt. This time, of course, the 'homework' is genuine: from whatever deep and unconscious motives, the young man has asked his mother, and she has agreed, to help him with his assignment. But there is no question here of an A+: this is, after all, 'forbidden' homework. After he leaves, she destroys the film in anguish, just before the arrival home of her husband, with her child by the second marriage, and he has to ask what she has been burning. 'What' indeed! She has destroyed the bomb that would explode the whole culture at its foundation. Given the film's references to John Ford, one might say that, in destroying the film, she has printed the legend. But Hermosillo has already printed the fact.

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
JAIME HUMBERTO HERMOSILLO

## The Necessity of Telling a Story

On September 12, 1992 we met with Jaime Humberto Hermosillo and Arturo Villaseñor, who has collaborated with him on a number of projects. The interview took place in Toronto during the Festival of Festivals; Jaime Humberto was here to promote and present *Forbidden Homework*.

We were very pleased to have a chance to interview Jaime, whose work we greatly admire. The interview was conducted on an informal basis; although Jaime had a translator present, he communicated his thoughts and ideas with little help. In transcribing the interview we have tried to preserve Jaime's responses in his own words without imposing serious changes. We'd like to take this opportunity to thank Jaime publicly for affording us his time. He is a charming and gracious person whose delight in cinema animates his conversation, sweeping aside all obstacles of language.

**FLORENCE JACOBOWITZ:** I'd like to begin by asking you about your interest in classical Hollywood cinema because it seems to be a very strong influence on your



Hermosillo on the set of *Doña Herlinda and Her Son* (1984).

by Florence Jacobowitz,  
Richard Lippe and  
Robin Wood



The Quiet Man: Maureen O'Hara, Victor McLaglen, John Wayne, Barry Fitzgerald.

work. Perhaps you can talk about the influence of Hollywood in your latest film, *Forbidden Homework*: for instance, the references to *The Quiet Man*.

**JAIME HUMBERTO HERMOSILLO:** Yes, yes of course... The American films from the '40s and the '50s were a great influence for me because I used to see a lot of films during my childhood; it was the only fun one could get where I lived, so I saw a lot of Hollywood films. They are a big, big influence in my work, especially Alfred Hitchcock. I say especially because although I like someone like John Ford very much, he is not that influential to my work. I also like Vincente Minnelli very much and, well, I'm going to forget a lot of my favourite directors. That happens all the time when they ask you your influences. And Howard Hawks of course, and you know in *Forbidden Homework* there is a reference to Raoul Walsh. There is a reference to one of my ten top films, *White Heat*, because the boy asks the woman to come on "top of the world." I paid homage to *White Heat* in my first film, *Los Nuestros*. It was shot in 16 mm, with my mother as an actress. There is a scene in it where the character is watching a film on television, and it's the

final scene of *White Heat* where James Cagney says, "Look at me, Ma, top of the world." So in this film, I tried to pay homage as well.

**ROBIN WOOD:** And that is a hint in the film, if one picks up on that, that the actress is his mother.

**JAIME:** Yes!

(Laughter).

**RICHARD LIPPE:** Is Bunuel a favourite director of yours as well, because of the reference to *Illusions Travel by Streetcar*?

**FLORENCE:** Is that Lilia Prado?

**JAIME:** Yes. That is the poster they have in the room. I think that Bunuel is a big influence on most filmmakers of my generation. I don't give preference to Bunuel's films. There are other filmmakers I prefer to Bunuel, even though I like him very much but I try to preserve myself from too great an influence. There is a certain resemblance between Maria Rojo and Lilia Prado, so in that sense I make reference to Bunuel.

**FLORENCE:** She's mentioned in the first version, on video tape, as well.

**EVERYONE:** Yes...yes.

ROBIN: I think, perhaps, that *The Passion According to Berenice* is the film that is most like Bunuel in certain ways. Would you agree?

JAIME: Well, it is also like Sirk or Cukor...I haven't mentioned Cukor.

ROBIN: Yes.

JAIME: I admire Cukor's work very much, but I think that all those films I saw when I was a young man or maybe a child really got deep inside me and changed my way of looking at the world, and that's more important—it made me wish to become a film director. I like to think of the audience, to be a good narrator and to try to tell a story clearly, as opposed to copying the external things like a shot or a movement of the camera, but something more profound.

ROBIN: It's interesting that alongside this fascination with mainstream Hollywood, your work also has very strong tendencies towards the avant-garde. It's very self-reflexive, for example, in a way in which Hollywood films almost never are.

RICHARD: And experimental, like the long takes in *Homework*.

ROBIN: The first *La Tarea* is done in a single shot lasting almost sixty minutes. So there is another influence there as well.

JAIME: Yes. When I was a student looking at films or trying to make my own films in 16 mm, the boom of the Nouvelle Vague was going on and that was a big influence.

RICHARD: Are there any New Wave directors you particularly responded to like Godard or Truffaut or Rivette?

JAIME: I liked Rivette very much. Yes, and also Truffaut. Even if there is no direct influence, I like the Truffaut films very much and I share his admiration of Hitchcock. I also like Chabrol's films very much and the Godard film that was a big influence was of course, *A Bout de Souffle*. There was the possibility of freedom to shoot films. One could take the camera in one's hands and walk down the street trying to tell a story, and one need not be ashamed if they were not perfect technically. So that gave me a great sense of freedom.

RICHARD: I was saying to Robin, after seeing *Forbidden Homework* that the whole long sequence on the rooftop between the mother and the son reminded me a little bit of *Le Gai Savoir* (1969) where the characters played by Jean Pierre Léaud and Juliet Berto were photographed on a studio set against a stark black background. In each film, two people are talking to each other against this black background. The colours are strong just like Maria Rojo's orange dress and the look of *Forbidden Homework* is very Godard-like, of the period when he was using long takes with dialogue against a minimal background.

JAIME: I don't remember having seen that film but this can take us to other things. The minimalism of this period interests me, trying to make films that are not very expensive, with only a few characters and most of the time in only one location, one set with unity of space and, if possible, unity



Forbidden Homework: Maria Rojo, Esteban Soberanes

of time. That is the same in the *Homework* films. I use these principles in another film that I shot last year which has not yet been released called *An Expected Encounter*, which also stars Maria Rojo and a Mexican actress and singer called Lucia Pinja. It is a script Arturo wrote and I directed.

ROBIN: Oh yes, I was going to ask about that. I knew you'd done that.

JAIME: Yes. It's only two characters in one location, again very minimal. I have always been interested in working with the actors and this way I save time which one can lose when one shoots a film in a lot of places, transporting things and putting in and taking down lights usually takes up half the time for shooting so this way I can work more comfortably with the actors.

ROBIN: Acting seems to be a great preoccupation in the *Homework* films, all three. They seem very much concerned with what is acting and with what is not acting.

JAIME: Yes.

ROBIN: I think *Forbidden Homework* carries that furthest. This is the section where Maria Rojo talks about her dead hus-

band and how she went to see *The Quiet Man* and saw him on the screen instead of John Wayne and there is no sign that she's acting, that the character is acting at all. It seems to be absolutely directly from the person. And then at the end she says, "Did you have the film in the camera?" (Laughter).

How do you see a moment like that? to what extent was she acting? To what extent was she not acting? Of course, we know it's also Maria Rojo acting because we saw you directing the film at the beginning which gives it another perspective again. But she is acting somebody who knows she is acting but perhaps stops acting and it becomes real. Is that what happens, then?

**JAIME:** Yes! Even at the end of her monologue when the kid stands up and goes to kiss her, there is a look between them and she asks, "Shall I go on?" and she retakes the acting of the part she has to do for the video her son has written but it is supposed that that moment was a real improvisation and something very intimate that she said to the camera and she knows that it's a real camera taking her and not the one that doesn't have film. She is aware of that.

**ROBIN:** Was the character improvising or was Maria Rojo improvising?

**JAIME:** No. The character was improvising because I wrote that monologue for Maria Rojo word for word but what is most important, is that I wrote it especially for her, not for the character but for Maria Rojo because this film, *Forbidden Homework*, was written especially for her. I've known her for maybe twelve years. We have made ten films together. This is the tenth film we've made together. We are very close. I know her very well and she knows me quite well so that album that she sees at the end of the film is her personal album with the photos of her dead husband, the father of her only son who is twenty-one years of age. I wrote that part especially for her and no other artist could have done this.

**FLORENCE:** It's a very beautiful moment at the end when she's looking at the pictures and she talks about pruning the tree.

**JAIME:** Yes.

**RICHARD:** Jaime, at the beginning of the film you introduce yourself as a director and you're on screen and you are beginning to direct, but then you don't go back to that at the end. Why do you not go back and then tell us again that we've watched a movie? Why do you leave us with the characters as opposed to returning to the movie-making device given that you've made that elaborate introduction?

**ROBIN:** Yes. I also thought that it would go out at the end again to you directing.

**JAIME:** Well, I decided to put that at the beginning because that would be a way of signing my film. I don't usually appear in my films. I decided to be in the beginning of the film and say, "Camera, and Action." That's a way to "sign" my film and also to show that we are shooting that film because a film is a lie. I, as the director, pretend that it is *real*. So, if I lie but I say that I am lying, I am telling the truth! I pretend to go from fiction saying that there is a fiction to those characters who are most of the time on a set that was a set of a theatre stage. We can see at the beginning of the film some of the theatre seats in the background and we see the

lights sometimes and I pretend that what is happening there is not real, only a presentation, but as the film goes on, each time it's more close to reality. So, when she goes downstairs, at the film's conclusion, the final scenes have been shot in a real house with a kitchen and all the details that are in a kitchen. I wanted that very realistic.

**FLORENCE:** It would have changed the tone so much. It's a very powerful ending that you leave us with. Had you gone back to the framing device, you would have undercut this very powerful ending.

**JAIME:** The problem is that if at the end I show also the camera or the crew or myself, I am saying that all that I show was not real and I should like that to be real.

**RICHARD:** Did the scene in the kitchen where the wind is blowing her hair actually happen in the house or was it a set? It's a very striking moment when the wind blows back her hair.

**JAIME:** That's the very point that I was very interested in because the whole film is a mix of reality and fantasy and how films could interact with reality. So, that moment, in the kitchen, when the young man is leaving, is a very realistic moment because he's in the house, but the wind and the position of the actors are exactly as the one where John Wayne finds Maureen O'Hara in the house in spring time. I showed the actors the whole film, *The Quiet Man*, and that scene especially so that they could repeat it because the mother has such an ideal memory of that film and the boy saw that film when he was a child. Now the film comes into reality and they are John Wayne and Maureen O'Hara and really it's like a miracle as Maria Rojo looks like Maureen O'Hara in that scene and we didn't do anything to create that. She just looked like Maureen O'Hara. Another very interesting thing occurred when I decided to do this scene that way: I didn't dare to dress the young man as John Wayne because I said to myself, no young man at this time would wear a cap and that overcoat so if I put him in those clothes, I'm pushing it! So, I asked the actor how he wanted to be dressed and in his room he has a photo of Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* with his black leather jacket and he told me that he wanted to have this black leather jacket and I said okay. But then talking to Maria Rojo about her dead husband and her son, she told me that when her husband died she asked her young boy what he wanted from the things—a Volkswagen, some clothes—that his father left and her son chose a cap and an overcoat. And it is the cap and the overcoat that we use in the film. I decided to put it in the film because Maria Rojo's real son used them frequently so Maria Rojo was very moved to see the actor dressed with the clothes of her son that he inherited from her dead husband. It was important to put a sense of reality into the film. They are enacting a scene from a film they love. I asked production to use a big fan to have that wind in her hair.

**RICHARD:** It's a nice moment.

**ROBIN:** When you made the first version on video, did you have any idea about the later ones?

**JAIME:** No, no idea.

**ROBIN:** Because we were very struck when watching the first version again yesterday by the moment where the



*Deceptive Appearances* (1977). The still may look like typical 'woman as object for the male gaze' pornography, but when you see below the waist you learn that appearances are indeed deceptive.

woman says to the man, "You should do this with your holy mother."

(Laughter).

**ROBIN:** It was as if you knew already that the third version was going to be about that.

**JAIME:** The process has been very, very peculiar because *Homework* the video was shot with a video recorded on to a cassette giving me that possibility of shooting without cuts for one hour and so I discovered the possibility of doing the film. With most of my films, I never think first how I'm going to shoot it. I think about the story I'm going to tell, and when I am shooting, I work with the actors first and then decide what the camera is going to do. If I can put the camera only in one place and not move it, I prefer that. If I need to move the camera, it's because the actors move and I want to go with them. But in this case, for the first *Homework*, by chance, I put the video camera on the floor connected to the television and I saw this very peculiar point of view—like a cat, seeing things from its eyes. Someone in Guadalajara said that *Homework* the film and video had an influence of Ozu the director because of the

idea of a stationary camera. I made a joke as Ozu in Spanish sounds like 'orso'—bear. So, I said jokingly in an interview that there was not an influence of Orso/Ozu, but a cat.

(Laughter).

**RICHARD:** Was the video totally scripted or was some of that improvised by the actors?

**JAIME:** Yes, it was all scripted. On the whole, I don't like improvisation—it could be superb but you don't have control. Sometimes a superb scene is improvised but it takes too long to get what you ultimately want.

**RICHARD:** How many times did you shoot the original video? Was it just once?

**JAIME:** Just once, yes. I wrote the screenplay and asked my friends, the actors of the video, who live in Guadalajara, to come to rehearsal in my apartment. So we met to rehearse maybe three weeks all night, five days per week to refine this tape and rehearse every movement. It was very important because if they missed something, for example, his shirt in a wrong place could cover the lens, it can be fixed. So, everything was very rehearsed, as in theatre, we even taped the rehearsals. At the end of the rehearsals, we had a rough

print in video. The dailies changed abruptly because we stopped one day and began the next with a different sequence but that didn't matter. At the end of the rehearsal, the actors took the videos home with them and studied their movements. When they felt sure, I asked them if they were ready for a final recording and the actors said, "Okay, we are ready." We did it only once and I was looking at the television monitor during the recording. It was the first time in my life as a director that I could see the birth of my work immediately. So, I was watching them as the camera was recording them and even prepared for some mistake. I asked them if at the end of the video could we have a section specially where they can talk about the mistakes they made. For the shooting of the video, for example, the woman's stocking has a hole and I saw it on the monitor. I was scared if it stayed that way through the entire video and there would be no reference made to it, it would be a big mistake so during the filming I wrote a note saying, "Please make a reference to the run in her stocking." At the moment he walks out of camera range, I gave the note to him, and they improvised for the video. In the film version we have more control because we have shorter takes, five, eight, ten minutes, so we can manage any mistakes that occurred.

FLORENCE: It struck me when I was watching *Forbidden Homework* that on the one hand it feels very improvised but very choreographed at the same time. For example, the

dance scenes use very precise movements and yet at times it felt very free-flowing and improvised. The film is a very interesting mix of this kind of improvisation and choreography. It seemed almost like a musical.

(Sound of wine glasses being refilled).

JAIME: I hope that was the impression. It's stylized and I should like to think that is what happened. There's a link that you missed because after the *Homework* film I put it on the stage in Mexico. I used the same type of set on which I shot *Forbidden Homework*. It was a challenge to do *Homework* in the theatre. Everybody said it's not going to work—it's a very cinematic story. But I made a very important change. If *Homework* was seen in the movie theatres in 1:33, the classic format, and the film is set in an interior, as in the theatre, for the stage version I had it set on a roof and the size of the set was in Cinemascope. It was elongated and people were seated on either side of the set so it made the stage production very cinematic. It was also very interesting for the audience in the theatre because of the use of videos. We put three monitors on one side of the audience and three on the other side. The audience could choose to see the action on the stage or on the monitors but the monitors showed the point of view of the camera that the woman put on the stage so as a result, the monologues of the characters are different in the stage version. Also, the theatre audience could view the actors in close-up thanks to the use of video. This was a result of where the actress placed the camera; I wasn't try-

*The Passion According to Berenice* (1976).



ing to be experimental. The audience of the stage version could see what was being taped and this gave me preparation for the film. When I decided to make *Forbidden Homework* I chose especially to shoot in the theatre and it was useful because we could rehearse the actors, Maria Rojo and Esteban Soberanes. There were many rehearsals in the theatre during the morning when they were performing the stage version in the evenings. We had a lot of time for rehearsals, and if something seems improvised, it's because they are good actors. Everything was very co-ordinated though it looked like the very first time it was being done.

**ROBIN:** I think perhaps what is even more interesting than any of the three films individually is the relationship between the three. What would be ideal would be to show the three films one right after the other.

**JAIME:** Yes.

**ROBIN:** Because the whole relationship is built on a system of likeness and difference. The fact that the three films are so alike in certain obvious ways forms a background to all the things that are so different between them. I think the tone changes greatly. The second is much funnier than the first and the third is much sadder and more melancholy and dark than either of the other two.

**JAIME:** Now they are going to do that. They are going to show both *Homeworks* together in the Chicago film festival (1992) and they may do this in Montreal in October. They want both so they can show it together.

**ROBIN:** The second and the third?

**JAIME:** Yes, the second and the third. Not the video but it could be very exciting to send the video also.

**RICHARD:** When did you make the decision to change it from the male character in the video to the female character who's doing the taping in *Homework*? How did that come about that you changed the sex role?

**JAIME:** That came from Howard Hawks...The film with Rosalind Russell, *His Girl Friday*. He changed the roles of the characters from the stage version for the film, so I took the idea from him.

(Laughter).

**JAIME:** The idea came to me after I made the video for the film version of *Homework*. The actors were really happy because they read the screenplay and they saw the video and were very sure of what they were going to do. But the moment I said, "We are going to change; you are the one who sets up the camera and you're the one who arrives," the change of the roles was a challenge to them and very interesting. Now when I made *Forbidden Homework* I had to change it for other reasons.

**FLORENCE:** It moves from screwball comedy to high melodrama.

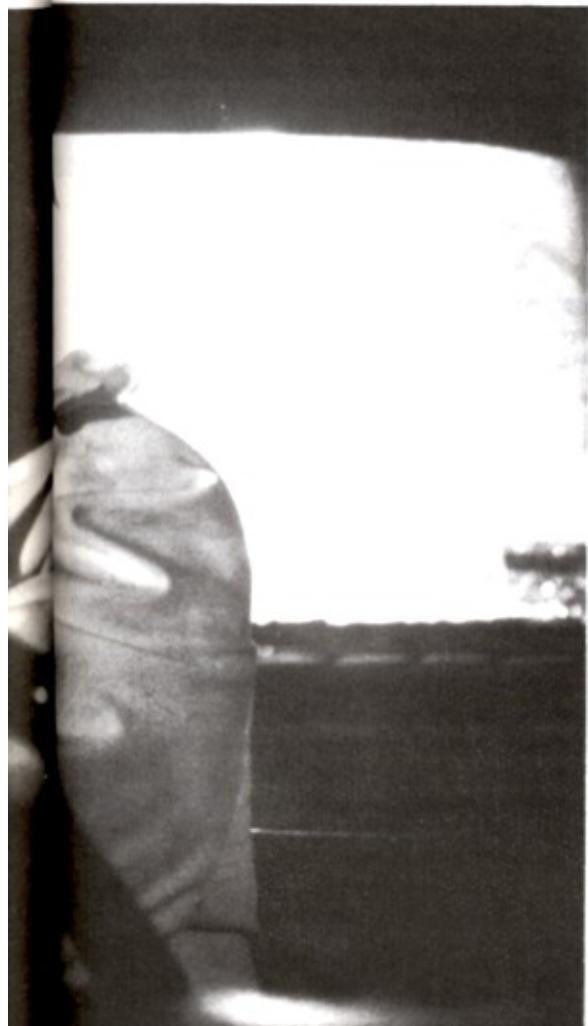
**JAIME:** That is a very interesting expression, "high melodrama"; I like it so much because I love melodrama.

**FLORENCE:** So do we. When I saw the third version, I wasn't waiting for a surprise ending. It really changes the way you see the film. If you don't expect the twist of the earlier version, then you think that there's something very sinister going on because he's taping her and hasn't told her that he's taping her. I think it's quite different for your audience who will have seen the second *Homework* and then see *Forbidden Homework* and perhaps expect some twist or surprise at the end. It's a different experience if you hadn't seen the first two.

**RICHARD:** It's interesting, Florence and I were talking about this when we watched the first video. There is a growing sense of intimacy between the viewer and the characters. I mean, it starts out with the viewer being distanced from the characters, and this changes as they start revealing themselves in various ways. It's partly their taking off their clothes but it is partly their saying various things about themselves and becoming intimately involved, and all the films you've been doing are about the question of intimacy. It's not necessarily sexual, or purely sexual like taking off your clothes in front of the camera, but it has more to do with the medium of film which can be intimate and records something very intimate because of the closeups and direct contact but I was also thinking, it's interesting that in these films you don't set up direct identification with the characters to produce intimacy. Was this your intention?

**JAIME:** Yes, very much. That's why *Bathroom Intimacies* could be included with these films. They are in front of the camera, not only taking off their clothes but being sincere with the camera.

**ROBIN:** In *Forbidden Homework*, I don't know but I think that there may be many different ways of understanding what happens in the film because you're never quite certain what's acting and what's not acting but I take it that the





intention was that the sex for the *Homework* would be simulated and that it becomes real because or partly because of the way the mother reveals herself to the son through the monologue and so on. Is that how you see it?

JAIME: Yes! Absolutely.

ROBIN: But of course you can't prove that the sex isn't simulated because at the end you find out that they've been acting. In the same way, everything in the film invites this speculation, is it real, is it not? But of course, you've told us at the beginning that nothing is real because it's you directing a movie.

(Laughter).

JAIME: Well, there is something I could never know and that is whether the actress and the actor may or may not have made love. They will never say it to me.

ROBIN: Oh really! That's true? You don't know?

(Laughter).

JAIME: I don't know...We prepared that for a long time and it could be real knowing them.

RICHARD: It was interesting that in this last film, *Forbidden Homework*, you are more discreet about the nudity and sex. In the first two versions, there's much more that is explicit whereas in this one you keep the camera on their faces during the whole sex act. Maria Rojo keeps on making reference to her body and diets and looking good and wondering if she is still attractive. What happened there? Was this Rojo's concern to have the camera remain on the actors' faces?

JAIME: Well, I decided from the beginning that in this film I wanted to change and not to repeat *Homework* and I didn't want to be compliant with the audiences or producers. As *Homework* has been a big success, they could ask me to make something very similar. And I pretend that the third version was very faithful to *Homework* but I wanted to make it different in tone—in "high-melo" and so I don't have them nude. There are no nudes in the film.

RICHARD: This version is very much more delicate and sensitive to their feelings because when you find out that they are mother and son, it becomes much more of a fragile situ-



Matinee (1976).

ation. It's more appropriate that they don't expose themselves fully by being nude.

JAIME: In addition to *The Quiet Man*, I showed the actors Leo McCarey's *An Affair to Remember*, the Deborah Kerr/Cary Grant film, because I wanted that tone of dramatic comedy in *Forbidden Homework*, to make it very different than the other ones.

ROBIN: How was the film received when you saw it, by the festival audience?

JAIME: Quite well! Thursday, I was very nervous but this morning I was more relaxed so I think I could watch more the reactions of the audience. They were exactly the ones I wanted. They liked the film as a light comedy and they were laughing at the points that they should laugh, but what was very important was what was going to happen when the tone suddenly changed to high melo. The reaction of the audience was perfect.

ROBIN: That's good. I was afraid that the viewers who had seen the second version might be disappointed by this

because they found the second version so hysterically funny. We saw it last year with a packed house—absolutely full. The response was amazing. They were laughing all the way through and there was lots of applause at the end; I think it almost got a standing ovation. They were thrilled because they found it so funny and I thought that simply because they weren't prepared for this, there might be a less positive response because they were probably expecting, in the same way as your producers, more of the same thing and not this kind of darkening and deepening of the tone.

JAIME: Well, that was the real challenge for me—to make this version and not be complaisant with the audience.

ROBIN: Why didn't *La Tarea* (the second version of *Homework*) get distribution? It could have run for a month or more; I cannot see why nobody bought it. If the audience loved it, it could have been a box office hit.

JAIME: Something similar happened in the U.S.A. because at some film festival it had been a great success but no one bought it.

ROBIN: I don't understand it at all.

FLORENCE: Chabrol is not picked up for distribution in Toronto either, so you're in good company.

ROBIN: Yes, but Chabrol doesn't get the riotous reception that this film got. The audience were ecstatic. Surely there must have been somebody there who noticed that. Someone could have made a small fortune out of that film.

JAIME: I know from the producer in the U.S.A. that two or three distributors were very interested in the film but in the end they didn't buy it, and it seems that in the U.S.A. there was a problem with the sex scene where the man was nude. They told me that that was the problem and they didn't want it. I don't know if it's different in Canada...

ROBIN: The mystery of the phallus has to be preserved. You can't show that the phallus is just a penis. It has to be the Empire State Building or the Eiffel Tower (or the C.N. Tower). (Laughter).

RICHARD: I was going to ask you something about *Bathroom Intimacies*. Perhaps I was expecting the film's political statement to be treated with humour as in *Doña Herlinda and Her Son*, which brings in a lot of humour to make a political statement, but it seems to me that in *Bathroom Intimacies* there was this kind of straining between using this format of the mirror in the washroom and the political structure you were imposing on all these characters who were all in various states of desperation or unhappiness, but basically desperation, I guess. I found it kind of unrelieved. It's not that humour should be there to relieve it necessarily but I just found the film to be unrelenting and not quite satisfying. It seemed to bear down on these people who were so unhappy and who had so little opportunity to move ahead. It broke very much with what you've been doing now in some ways like the *Homework* films and it's a step in a very different direction and I was wondering how you feel about *Bathroom Intimacies*. Do you consider it a successful film? Did you like that film?

JAIME: I had very much that feeling and I can say in Mexico the film critics preferred that film to *Homework*.

ROBIN: I can understand that. It's more "serious."

JAIME: The success with the audience could have been better

but it's also true that *Bathroom Intimacies* responds to a mood in Mexican society, the year it has been shown. It was a moment of general sadness and desperation especially that year.

FLORENCE: So the audience identified with that.

JAIME: Yes.

RICHARD: My other question regards the husband and wife and their unhappy and uneasy relationship. She has accepted the system and she works with the system and he's half-heartedly rebelling against being there. The wife is the crucial character in the film, isn't she? She's the survivor in the film. She sustains this whole thing. She's like Doña Herlinda in a way. It's as if you have to do these things and this is the way it works and this is the way things are and she accepts it and makes do.

ROBIN: A kind of dark mirror image of Doña Herlinda.

RICHARD: She knows what to do and does it to keep on going, surviving and maintaining respectability and she's always making herself up and getting ready to go to work and keeps going on. Doña Herlinda's a wonderful character...I watched the film again last night and I like that film very much; all three characters are wonderful creations. You're so good with actors.

FLORENCE: I have a question about Doña Herlinda. I had a conversation with Robin about this. I'm a mother of two sons, and I said to Robin I hope I'm as accommodating with my sons as Doña Herlinda but then I thought maybe it's an issue of control as well. I mean, is this a question of accommodation or is it a question of keeping things under her control? Doña Herlinda remains on top of her world.

ROBIN: Just how benign is she?

FLORENCE: Yes, how accommodating is she? How much does she want her children close to her or just how much does she want to keep on top of all this? How do you perceive this character?

JAIME: Well, I don't think that Doña Herlinda is a very positive character. She's very sinister, too, because otherwise she wouldn't have asked her son to marry that woman. She helps her son to be happy as a gay man. She's very sinister. She's controlling things the way she wants but she's not giving them freedom.

FLORENCE: Exactly.

ROBIN: At least she chooses a woman who knows what's going on.

(Laughter).

RICHARD: Watching it last night, I thought that her manipulation is very much there. She wants to keep it within respectable limits. It's interesting that the film is also about human relations in the sense of needing people. Everyone needs somebody. She needs to have her son there but she's also accommodating to this young man whom she brings into the house and treats kindly, taking him to the movies, etc. It's not simply for the son. She wants to keep him there because she likes him, too. So, she seems to be open. She's not quite monstrous because she's lonely, and as she says, "You know what it means when your husband dies and you have nobody." She does want people around and the film is generous to everybody in a certain way. Nobody is exactly monstrous.

JAIME: "Everyone has their reasons."

FLORENCE: It is very much like Renoir.

RICHARD: Maybe he should say "No" but he can't. As you said, "Everyone has their reasons."

FLORENCE: There's that nice scene where he's crying in response to the song being performed and Doña Herlinda passes him a Kleenex and they cry together.

ROBIN: You could have made a Chabrol-like bourgeois tragedy where Doña Herlinda manipulates her son into a loveless marriage to a woman who does not know what the situation is, and it could have been an alternative version. But the fact that you took the Renoir path instead of the Chabrol path is interesting.

LEOPOLDO CHAGOYA (JAIME'S TRANSLATOR): I think one of the sinister aspects of Doña Herlinda is that part of why she does this is to control her own social image in her bourgeois group and the image of her son, and that's not a very noble motivation.

FLORENCE: It's a class issue as well.

JAIME: She's a nice character but some things she does are not fine, but it's beautiful to have those kinds of contradictions in the characters.

ROBIN: I think she's doing her best within that particular culture, within the social milieu that you depict. She's doing the most decent thing she can. Can you really ask for more than that?

RICHARD: I like the line when she says, "Can we baptize the baby with tequila?" She has a sense of humour.

ROBIN: I wanted to ask you, given all these variants in the three *Homework* films, did you ever consider a fourth version which would give you a whole different dynamics again, with two men?

JAIME: Oh, of course, father and son.

ROBIN: I was thinking of a casual pick-up four years ago.

FLORENCE: And the revelation is that they're father and son.

JAIME: I proposed all those ideas to the producer when we were going to do *La Tarea*, the first film; he said NO, NO, NO, that's impossible. We could be censored. It's too audacious. Little by little I got to do what I wanted because I proposed they be mother and son, and initially they said no and now we've done the film. I don't plan to do another version.

FLORENCE: Put it to rest, right?

JAIME: Those ideas could be done in some other films.

RICHARD: What was the film you and Arturo have done together in terms of those connections?

JAIME: Oh, it was a lot of connections with these films. It's also a story of two characters and it takes place only in one set and most of all, it's very important because it's a relationship between two women. One, a mature very famous actress, and a young woman who enters her mansion working as a maid. But the young woman insists that she be heard. The actress went away when she was young, leaving the father and their little child abandoned, and now the girl has grown up, seen the films, heard the song (the actress is a singer) and the father used to have the whole house covered with photos and posters of the actress. So this young woman has now come to see her telling her, "I'm your daughter." The actress denies that but it's very ambiguous. We don't really know if they're mother and daughter, but what is very

clear is that the young woman loves her not only as a mother but as a woman.

RICHARD: How did you come to this plot, Arturo?

ARTURO TRANSLATED BY JAIME: The original idea was to review the Mexican myth of famous actresses that portray a certain image that has nothing to do with their own Mexican reality—for instance, Maria Felix. The young girl represents the reality of people who live humbly with a critical financial situation. Anyone who lives that kind of reality, feeds from myths and that's where she falls in love. If she was a motherless daughter, the father could have made her believe that the great movie star was her mother. And she may have been her mother because when the two meet, there are a lot of coincidences.

FLORENCE: In a lot of your films, you demystify this idea of woman and what women should look like in our culture. Many of the films I've seen talk about the body being not perfect and then there's that extraordinary revelatory moment in *Forbidden Homework* where she takes off her wig. There is a striking contrast between what this ideal is in our culture and what it is in reality and the kind of reality women live with. It's a very interesting thematic that runs through a number of your films. It sounds as if the discussion of myth and ideal women may come up again.

JAIME: One of my films is called *Deceptive Appearances*. It's a constant in my work.

ROBIN: I tried to describe that film to Florence.

LEOPOLDO: (referring to the theme of incest in *Forbidden Homework*) The only film about happily consummated incest I can recall is *Le Souffle au Cœur* (*Murmur of the Heart*) by Louis Malle. Is that one of your influences?

JAIME: No, I saw that film some years ago (and *La Luna* by Bertolucci), but I didn't think of those films when I decided to make my film. When the screenplay was ready, we tried to find videos of those films but couldn't. But I like both of them, even the Bertolucci film is a very good film. What is interesting about *Forbidden Homework* is that the conflict is not only incest but the taping of incest because the mother doesn't regret what happened.

RICHARD: That's interesting, isn't it?

ROBIN: She doesn't feel guilty but she has destroyed the tape.

JAIME: Yes, that's an act of censorship. That's what the film means.

LEOPOLDO: That's a connection with Doña Herlinda: she doesn't mind what's going on in her home as long as it looks good.

RICHARD: I saw *Shipwrecked* and *The Summer of Miss Forbes* back to back and they seem to be very similar films. For example, in both films the water rushing in at the end. Did you see the connections between the two when you were making the latter film? Were you aware of the similarities in their content?

JAIME: In the short story which García Marquez wrote, there is no underwater scene at the end. That was a suggestion of mine, to put them in that way.

RICHARD: They are very complementary films. I found *Shipwrecked* to be more emotionally engaging. *The Summer of Miss Forbes* is a very disturbing film but I couldn't feel very much for the character whereas I could feel quite a bit for the

character in *Shipwrecked*. It was a quite powerful movie.

JAIME: The problem with *The Summer of Miss Forbes* is that it was not my own screenplay. I had a short story to respect and I am very respectful for other authors so I felt constrained.

FLORENCE: How did you like working with Hanna Schygulla?

JAIME: At the beginning, it was respectful but difficult. At the middle, it was quite terrible because of her ear problem: she didn't want to do the underwater scene. She asked me to change the ending and I said, "That's impossible, Hanna. The entire film is made for that scene at the end. It's impossible to change it." So we shot the film on land but had to stop the shooting because she didn't want to do the final scene. She went to Paris to do other work and then she came back. She said it was O.K. and she decided she would do it. We have to push her, but finally the relationship became better because she saw some rushes and liked what she saw. She's very professional and a very good actress and in that way I was very happy because I think she's quite wonderful.

RICHARD: Yes, she's very good in the film.

FLORENCE: Are you thinking of doing *Madame Bovary*?

JAIME: Oh, I'd love to.

ROBIN: You mentioned two projects before: one was *The Aspern Papers* of Henry James with the papers becoming films and Maria Felix in it, and the other was another film version of *Madame Bovary* transposed to modern day Mexico. What's happened to those? I want to see them. We'd love to see them. I spent the last four years longing to see them.

JAIME: The problem with the *Madame Bovary* project is that it's a very expensive film. There are a lot of characters and a lot of locations so I can never get the money.

ROBIN: You have Renoir, Minnelli, and Chabrol. Have you seen the Chabrol?

JAIME: Yes, I didn't like it very much.

FLORENCE: I like the actors.

JAIME: About *The Aspern Papers*, I hope I can raise the money.

ROBIN: Is Maria Felix still there?

JAIME: Yes. They are making right now an hommage to her because it's been fifty years since she shot her first film.

FLORENCE: If you have a star like Maria Rojo who agrees to be in your films, could you then say I have a star and fund-raise based on that?

JAIME: That helps a lot because now she's a very popular actress. She's always been a great actress, but now after *Danzón* and *Homework*, she's a popular one. Audiences are now fans of Maria Rojo so that helps a lot.

RICHARD: You are interested in gay thematics but your films aren't restricted to gay themes. Do you ever find yourself thinking "I should do a gay film" just because you're gay? How do you feel about that or how do you judge your films and your work in relation to your identity as a person? Do you feel a commitment to do a certain amount of work that is gay orientated?

JAIME: I never plan my films in that way. It's only most of the time a necessity of telling a story.

*We thank the Festival of Festivals for making this interview possible.*

# Why We Should (Still) Take Hitchcock Seriously



by Robin Wood

Alfred Hitchcock and the actors from *Rope*. From l., Farley Granger, Edith Evanson, Douglas Dick, John Dall, Constance Collier, Sir Cedric Hardwicke, Joan Chandler, James Stewart and Alfred Hitchcock

The state of things today, as I understand it:

1. Not only our civilization, but the planet itself, is under threat (global warming, the depletion of the ozone layer, the 'greenhouse effect'...). Within, perhaps a century, perhaps a decade (estimates vary), our planet, or substantial parts of it, may have become uninhabitable; cancer will be commoner than the common cold.
2. These conditions have been jointly produced by capitalism (greed, competition, power) and patriarchy (socially constructed masculinity, the 'domination syndrome,' the 'rape' of nature, habitually conceived of as 'feminine'). The other culprit (a sort of complementary enemy to capitalism), Stalinist and post-Stalinist Communism, has now capitulated to capitalism, apparently sweeping aside the option of a re-thought Marxism, 'Socialism with a human face' as Gorbachev put it.
3. The dominant response to the signs of imminent cata-

clysm has been, perversely, a massive swing to the Right, a nostalgic yearning for the restoration of what are called 'the good old values' or sometimes 'family values,' essentially the values of capitalism and patriarchy—in other words, the values that have brought us to this worse-than-crisis.

4. The consequence of this can only be the escalation of the progress toward ultimate disaster, via new forms of Fascism spreading all over the West (they are gaining considerable popularity, and must be seen as the logical outcome of capitalism/masculinism). Side effects will be the persecution of racial minorities, gays and lesbians; the erosion of human rights and especially the rights of women; the increase in the already enormous gulf between rich and poor; and the increase in unemployment, destitution, and homelessness.

These all seem to me truisms. They would not be worth reiterating if there was evidence that more than a small minority were paying any real heed to them.

IN 1965 I OPENED the original *Hitchcock's Films* with the question, 'Why should we take Hitchcock seriously?' Today, the question should perhaps be, 'Why should we take anything seriously, except the possibility of direct, and revolutionary, political action?' From a certain point of view, not only bourgeois journalism but even the most serious critical, theoretical, aesthetic pursuits appear today irrelevant, irresponsible and frivolous. But there remains the disturbing question: What exactly can one do? Let me speak for myself. In my sixties, after a lifetime's training in the disciplines of art and criticism, what are my options, faced with the strong possibility that not only our civilization (and with it the complex artistic tradition I have attempted to serve), but life on this planet, may not survive another century? Become a terrorist? I feel enormous sympathy for terrorists: not for their actions, which are invariably counter-productive, but for the desperation that drives them to those actions. My sense of helplessness and redundancy is at times overwhelming, and I imagine when I say this I speak for many—perhaps most—intellectuals today. All the power—including the power of the media—seems to be in the hands of the destroyers: the capitalists, the rich, and their minions, the politicians, without ideals or vision, the ignominious minority who apparently care nothing for the future provided they and their cronies can lay their filthy corrupt hands on as much material gain as possible within their lifetimes.

If one is to go on writing—and living—and retain one's self-respect, however, one has to feel that one is contributing, in however small and marginal a way, to the only aim that is still worth pursuing: the development of a strong and unified Left, in which lies our only hope. In the supermarket sequence-shot near the end of *Tout Va Bien* (which has lost nothing of its relevance in the twenty years since it was made), Jane Fonda reaches the conclusion of the film's trajectory: 'Change everything. But how?' Her answer (if my French serves me, rather than the egregious subtitles) is 'Par tous les bouts,' which I translate as 'Through every end,' or, more idiomatically, 'By every means possible.' The film is concerned, precisely, with the role of the intellectual within a revolutionary context. We do not at the moment live with-

in one, but it seems valid to extend this to a context within which revolution is clearly necessary.

The tragedy of the modern Left (if it can still be said effectively to exist—I think it can, but scattered) is precisely its disunity. All the components are there: the women's movement, the anti-racist movement, the gay/lesbian movement, environmentalism... And beyond them the great masses of the disaffected and disenfranchised—the unemployed, the homeless, the millions existing below the poverty level, the millions of young people whose alienation can at present express itself only in violence and negation. One has at times the feeling that everything is in place, awaiting only a focus, a unifying core. Meanwhile, each movement maintains its own agenda, and tends to cling to the illusion that the agenda can be realized without changing *everything*. The necessity is the realization that the obvious differences are completely transcended by the common basic aims: the overthrow of capitalism and patriarchy. The only valid function remaining today for the intellectual is to work toward the strengthening of the Left and the development of consciousness, on whatever level, in whatever field, s/he is qualified to operate, while maintaining a sense of totality, of the links that could make these disparate struggles one struggle. My own expertise, such as it is, lies in film, especially Hollywood film: a privileged site, if one cares to consider it in that way, for the examination of all issues of sexual politics, questions of gender and sexuality, the analysis of patriarchy and 'masculinity.' And within that privileged site, Hitchcock's films occupy a unique position: nowhere else in commercial cinema are the mechanisms of 'masculinity,' the drive for power and domination, the repression of the 'feminine,' dramatized and exposed with incomparable thoroughness and complexity. They are a microcosm in which the ills of an entire culture can be analysed and understood.

Crucial here (and this is where my own work on Hitchcock allies itself with that of Tania Modleski, to which I shall return) is Hitchcock's relation to the 'feminine': the very strong tendency (strongest in the finest, most fully achieved, most intensely felt, of the films: *Notorious*, *Vertigo*, *Marnie*...) to identify with the woman's position, and the simultaneous dread (inculcated in the male from infancy) of exposing to view and having to acknowledge his own femininity. What is dramatized in these films, and pushed rigorously to the point where it is laid bare for analysis, is essentially the source of violence against women in our culture. They are not, of course, 'feminist' movies in any sense of that term that would have general acceptance, but they seem to me of far greater use to feminism than many 'politically correct' works. (I assume here what perhaps can no longer be assumed, that the immense importance of feminism is generally recognized. I take it as axiomatic that, while feminism alone cannot save the world, the world cannot be saved without it.) I have analysed at some length (in *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*) the principle of dual identification that operates consistently in Hitchcock's greatest work: the superficial identification with the male position (the 'male gaze' made famous by Laura Mulvey), the disturbing tension generated by the far deeper and stronger identifica-

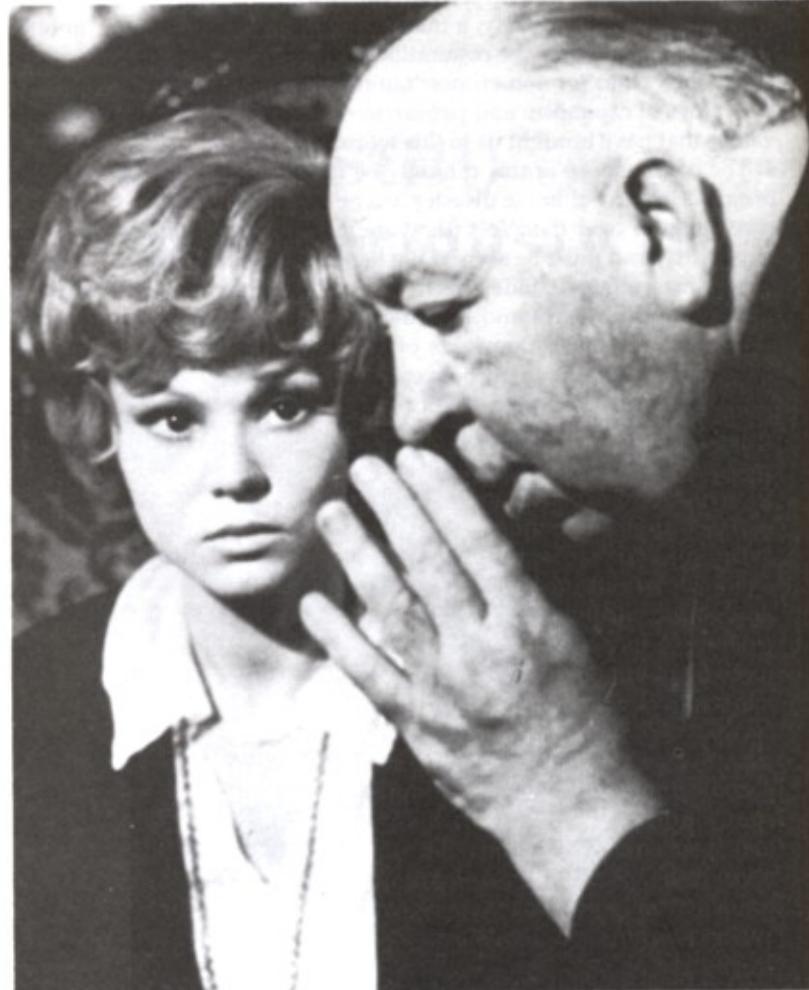
tion with the woman's position: with the result that the gaze of the viewer is turned back upon the male, and upon the roots of the domination drive in fundamental fears about gender and sexuality. Ultimately, what is exposed is the pathological nature of socially constructed masculinity, when pushed to its logical conclusion. It is by no means farfetched to relate what James Stewart does to Kim Novak in *Vertigo* to what our masculinist businessmen, industrialists, scientists and politicians are doing to the environment and the culture.

THE FOUR RECENT BOOKS on Hitchcock listed below do nothing to meet the kind of challenge I hope I have defined; though not without its incidental pleasures and illuminations, the week I devoted to reading them seems to me largely wasted. Taken together, they can perhaps be read as evidence of the abdication of the contemporary intellectual from social/political responsibility.

As my concern here is with the different ways in which what one might call 'the Hitchcock problematic' is currently formulated and discussed, I shall begin by clearing the ground a little, two of the books being irrelevant to such a concern. First, Mr. Finler's. I cannot see why, today, anyone would wish (a) to write this book, (b) to publish it, or (c) to read it. Finler begins his introduction:

Alfred Hitchcock, the 'master of suspense,' is one of the most remarkable figures in the history of the cinema. He became closely identified with the thriller or suspense movie relatively early in his career, when such pictures were generally looked down on by more serious film-makers and moviegoers. Hitchcock was quick to recognize and exploit the serious possibilities of the genre. His best pictures work on many levels; technically polished, with gripping and suspenseful plots, witty dialogue and often featuring top stars, they have an immediate appeal for audiences. He used the popular thriller format as a means of probing deep into the fears, foibles and neuroses of modern man. His films are full of surprises.

Were that the beginning of a student essay I would know at once that it would contain no surprises whatever. Having established at the outset this level of banality, Finler tenaciously sustains it to the end: he is nothing if not consistent. Although he informs us near the beginning that he regards himself as "...a film historian, rather than a 'critic'" (and no one is likely to accuse him of being the latter), he offers value judgements on practically every page, in the form generally of the most conventional and trite 'received opinions.' As for the history, it is simply a matter of regurgitating the kind of career outline and production details with



Hitchcock directing Barbara Harris in *Family Plot*.

which anyone seriously interested in Hitchcock will already be familiar, and which are in any case readily available.

I view Donald Spoto's book far more sympathetically. His love for the films is communicated on every page, his enthusiasm is infectious, his perceptions generally fresh. Wherever one opens the book, one comes on an interesting observation that throws light on some detail in this or that film. But this defines its limitations as well as its quality: one can open it anywhere, read a paragraph or two, put it aside, open it later somewhere else. Spoto's method is simply to take us through all fifty-two films rather in the manner of a tour guide in an art gallery, pausing to point out individual beauties, bits of technique, Hitchcock 'touches.' There is little sense of an ongoing, developing argument, and no critical methodology beyond what this description suggests. Since its original American publication in 1976, it has always seemed to me an ideal coffee-table book for one's guests to browse through with pleasure. But fifteen years have passed since then (although 'revised and updated,' its method and nature remain unchanged), and even in 1976 it was scarcely in the critical vanguard, untouched by any of the major developments in film theory since the sixties: the

introduction of concepts of ideology, semiotics, feminism... (Though it is, I suppose, one thing for Spoto to be untouched by feminism in 1976, quite another for Finler, in 1992, still to be able to refer to the Kim Novak character in *Vertigo* as a 'girl.' How can such ignorance be sustained?) I am glad to have the book available because it has a function (an intelligent, lively book for the casual reader), though it is not one that relates significantly to the contemporary currents of critical theory, neither developing nor challenging them.

Of considerable interest, however, is the relationship of this book to Spoto's later biography, *The Dark Side of Genius*. I suppose it is possible that they were planned as complements (Hitchcock, the artist who could do no wrong; Hitchcock, the man who could do no right), but I doubt it. It seems more probable that Spoto discovered, in the course of his researches and to his horror, that his idol had been guilty of some pretty nasty behaviour in his personal life, and, after the work of idolatry was completed and put aside, the horror took over. The material that he unearthed is fascinating, and often richly suggestive (although its 'truth' has been challenged by, among others, Patricia Hitchcock herself, who—according to Robert Kapsis—unambiguously repudiates the story of the cruel practical joke of which she was the alleged victim): I made extensive use of it in the chapter on 'The Murderous Gays' in *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*, though for purposes and conclusions very different from Spoto's. There, I suggested that, if you put the two books together, you could retitle the result 'From Reverence to Rape.' What is striking about the later book is how all the good things that have been said about Hitchcock the person are swiftly glossed over. The main text of *The Art of Alfred Hitchcock* ends with a series of brief tributes from the people who worked with him on *Family Plot*, including some women he did *not* sexually harass (e.g., Karen Black: 'He's a great man. He has ebullience of spirit, lightness of heart, charm. People feel different around him.'). None of this is permitted expression in *The Dark Side of Genius*.

**AND SO THE SERIOUS STUFF.** The book by Kapsis and the one edited by Slavoj Lizek conveniently represent two of the most influential approaches to Hitchcock, and to film in general, of the past few decades: the sociological and the semiotic respectively. The former approach has been considerably overshadowed by the latter, but it has none the less clung on tenaciously, and must be reckoned with. It has often introduced a welcome, if dubious, simulacrum of down-to-earth reality into a film culture whose dominant discourses seemed to be emanating from the planet Mars, if not Pluto; though perhaps only from France, which often seems, to those reared within an Anglo-Saxon tradition, equally distant.

The Lizek anthology (though it is never as silly as its title) offers thorough confirmation of what I see as the tragedy of the semiotics movement (dealt with at some length in the introduction to *Hitchcock's Films Revisited*). Through its liaison (notably developed in *Screen*) with Althusserian Marxism, it introduced into critical theory the

concept of ideology, thereby potentially transforming and redeeming a (now, in the context of the current crisis of our civilization) largely useless and irrelevant activity. It then proceeded to withdraw from any practical social/political engagement by walling itself in behind fortifications of impenetrable jargon, employed as a means of rendering radical and explosive ideas about the culture so obscure that only a few can grasp their import—the 'few' being, in effect, other academics, who don't matter any more. It thereby rapidly transformed itself into an exclusive, élitist club. Its followers can, of course, protest that no one is disbarred from membership. But, at the same time, the conditions for membership were made so formidable that most people turned aside at the gate. First, you had to accept the language and master a number of abstruse texts; second, you had to accept those texts (especially Lacan) as sacrosanct and unchallengeable; third, you had to swear to renounce all other forms of discourse, particularly more widely communicative forms; fourth, you had to agree that there is no such thing as human creativity (the 'death of the Author'). The ideas that initially fired the movement were revolutionary and subversive on a profoundly radical level, but so long as they remained the preserve of a small group of intellectuals speaking to each other in their own secret language, they remained quite unthreatening. It seems to me that the 'club' has now reached its ultimate stage of degeneracy: an academic club (in both the literal and popular sense of that word) in which the members develop their careers by reading learned papers to each other at conferences and listing them on their CVs.

The anthology demonstrates that, if nothing else, the club is still in operation (I thought Lacan was now decidedly and deservedly *passé*, but perhaps he will linger on for a few more years and a few more anthologies). It also demonstrates, very eloquently, that the movement that began as revolutionary has evolved into yet another formalism (not to be confused with what is known as 'Wisconsin Neo-formalism,' led by the not-too-daunting team of Bordwell/Thompson, and definitively debunked by Andrew Britton in *Cineaction* 15). Two concepts seem to be crucial: the concept of 'systems,' and the concept of 'intertextuality.' One of the major (negative) impulses behind the first phase of the 'semiotics of cinema' was the denunciation of 'impressionist' criticism: 'impressionism' was to be replaced by an exact science. The rejection of notions of creativity (or 'life,' might one say?) is already implicit in this: the assumption that everything in human existence can be explained. It is deeply ironic that the end result has been—through the concepts of 'systems' and 'intertextuality' especially—an 'impressionist' criticism far wilder and more imaginative than anything dreamt of in the heady days of early auteurism. 'Systems' can be 'discovered' everywhere; when one extends the systems to the intertextual, anything goes. No one, as far as I know, has so far related the handbag at the beginning of *Marnie* to the handbag of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, but it may come. The suggestion is not entirely frivolous, though it requires qualification. Semiotics has, on the other hand, rejected the notion of personal authorship as bourgeois and reactionary. On the

other hand, 'intertextuality' almost invariably (when it isn't applied to genre) means looking at links within the works of a particular (if non-existent) author.

It has become clear that (at least as commonly practised) semiology is not a science but a pseudo-science, its primary function being to convey the impression of the 'scientific' (or should I write 'Scientificity'?). Take, for example, the essay by Frederic Jameson on 'Spatial Systems in *North by Northwest*'. Jameson has become such a guru of contemporary intellectual culture that one feels a certain trepidation in challenging him. I have read his essay three times, and I think (I am not quite certain) that I understand it. He is analysing the relationship between various spaces in the film—the auction room, the cornfield, the various hotel rooms of 'George Kaplan,' the pinewood of the lovers' reunion, Mount Rushmore—in terms of complements and opposites: a perfectly valid project. I am not entirely clear what conclusion he reaches: indeed, the essay doesn't appear to have a conclusion, though it is possible that Jameson, in his modesty, assumes that his conclusion must be obvious to the merest idiot and hadn't reckoned on me. All of this is wrapped up in semiological jargon and accompanied by the obligatory series of diagrams. The clothing gives the impression that what is being said is being proven scientifically and is therefore authoritative, probably unchallengeable and 'true.' One connection we are to make is between (in the crop-dusting sequence) the 'expanse of the sky' and the 'expanse of the empty land below,' because 'both are furrowed with a set of parallel lines.' He then (Aha! Intertextuality!) in passing wishes us to connect this with the "trauma" of *Spellbound* (it is 'not without some distant affinity'—one should always distrust double negatives): 'the fateful ski tracks in the snow, reproduced by Gregory Peck's fork upon the white linen of the dining-table.' But the pay-off is still to come: we are finally to connect all these (perceiving a significance apparently crucial to a correct reading of the film, though it continues to elude me) with the Mount Rushmore 'all-too-familiar' statuary, and 'in particular the striations of the rock upon which the representational heads are embedded. Here, far more abstractly, we confront the same grid of parallel lines, systematically carved into the rock surface like a strange Mayan pattern.' Wow. Who wouldn't be impressed? But, if one is interested in looking for 'systems,' why not connect the trees in the pinewood with the corn in the cornfield (both grow upward), then link this back to the extremely vertical United Nations building and the vertical lines of the credits? These could then relate (of course, in a highly complex way) to all the horizontals in the film, such as streets, and the runway along which the plane is to take off near the end—and, naturally, the railway lines along which the trains run, which are also parallel lines, linking this system to the other in a dizzying metasystem of mind-boggling profundity. One almost, but not quite, swoons. (Parenthetically, I am still puzzled by a detail in Jameson's essay, the significance of which—for it must surely have one—continues to escape me entirely: Why does he place the names of certain male stars—e.g., 'Cary Grant,' 'James Mason'—in quotation marks, and not the names of female

stars, e.g., Ingrid Bergman, Eva Marie Saint? I have searched the essay for an explanation, and remain baffled.)

I HAVE BEEN INVOLVED in a number of PhDs (as supervisor, on examining committees, and most recently since my retirement as interested spectator of the work of a very close friend), and I have watched all too often the process whereby a student, initially fired with intellectual and creative excitement, the sense of having something to say, is systematically undermined and beaten down by the 'academic' demands: more quotations, more footnotes, more references, more bibliography... A PhD has become a matter, not of original thinking (which the process actively discourages) but of research: it must be built upon 'facts' and what other people have said, then reach a conclusion based upon this research, which is called 'scholarship.' The process therefore also discourages real intelligence: *creative* intelligence, as opposed to the ability to assimilate and reproduce. The process is heartbreaking to watch, and culminates in an examination conducted largely by 'examiners' who are totally ignorant of the subject under discussion, have no wish to engage with anything vital in the discourse, and are concerned only with whether more statements shouldn't have been footnoted; questions like 'Who said that?' are not uncommon, and the answer 'I said it' is not acceptable. My experience of PhDs contributed significantly to my disillusionment with academia (and academics) and to my decision to extricate myself from it; I have always hated it when people refer to me as an academic, regarding it as an insult (which is sometimes the intention).

The Kapsis book appears, in fact, not to have originated as a dissertation, but, as dissertations go, it would make an extremely strong one. The likeness is due to the fact that it is the product of another pseudo-science, sociology, whose requirements are rather similar: anything supported by 'facts' or references is assumed to be valid. Its central weakness—its hollowness—is that it is not what a work of sociology (or a PhD dissertation) cannot be, a work of criticism. We learn a great deal about how Hitchcock's reputation has developed, risen, fallen, changed in emphasis, and about the role Hitchcock himself played in developing it. What Kapsis can never tell us plainly is whether he himself believes that reputation (or some aspect or metamorphosis of it) to be justified; he is forever disbarred from telling us whether he believes Hitchcock to have been a great artist or whether the whole reputation is some kind of elaborate, manufactured hoax engineered by Hitchcock himself, publicity machinery, the media, and critics such as myself. That would require a value judgement and, as F. R. Leavis always insisted, a value judgement (however closely argued and firmly supported) is either personal or it is nothing. As pseudo-science, sociology cannot allow itself to be personal. There are, admittedly, occasional little lapses, unguarded moments when a choice of epithet allows us to penetrate the facade of scholarly 'objectivity' and perceive that Kapsis actually admires or enjoys Hitchcock's films, or some of them. The only thing approaching a reasoned value judgement (permitted because it arises out of 'evidence') that he offers is the cautious suggestion that *Marnie* might be considered an

important work of art because it has provoked, over the years, a wide range of differing and sometimes contradictory interpretation. This has always seemed to me a dubious criterion: *Hamlet* used to be regarded as Shakespeare's greatest play on precisely those grounds, but is it really greater than *Macbeth* (of which the range of interpretation has been comparatively narrow), or merely less coherent?

If one approaches it carefully and critically, Kapsis' book is extremely useful in its amassing of information and 'evidence.' The conclusions to which the evidence tends strike me as vague and dubious. I called sociology a pseudo-science, but perhaps all sciences, in so far as they pretend to 'truth,' are pseudo, even those subject to far more rigorous and precise testing than sociology. They discover demonstrable facts, but are they the only facts?—why are certain facts discovered at certain times, and not others?—and how can we be sure that the interpretation of those facts, as well as the choice, is free from ideological bias? Of course, it never is: 'objectivity' is ultimately an academic myth.

THESE FOUR BOOKS are united only by one striking absence: the absence of the political. The best—and worst—one can say for Finler's book is that it has no pretensions—to anything very much; the charm of Spoto's is essentially that of the naïveté of the 'amateur,' in both senses of the word. Neither author shows the least awareness even of having a political/ideological position. The demands of unbiased objectivity preclude the possibility that Kapsis' book might develop one: he not only cannot tell us plainly what he thinks of Hitchcock, he cannot even tell us what he thinks of the process by which reputations are built in the modern world, treating them, in the approved socio-logical manner, as 'data.' The absence of the political from the Lizek anthology is more surprising and reprehensible, because the major, and crucial, importance of the semiotics movement in its early phase—its great positive achievement—was precisely to introduce the political into criticism not as some optional adjunct but as its animating and motivating force. The subsequent betrayal—the transformation of the movement into a new kind of academic formalism—now seems complete and irreversible. It is clear that the retrograde movement of our culture in the eighties operated on every level, and that, by and large, precisely those who might have been expected to oppose the drift—the intellectuals—succumbed to it, endorsed it, reinforced it in their own convoluted ways. The answer to the question 'Why should we take Hitchcock seriously?' appears now to be 'Because his films allow us to say so many ingenious and clever things.' 'Postmodernism' (as manifested and celebrated in critical discourse) and 'Neo-formalism' are typical products of the ideological shifts of the eighties: the swing to the Right, the submergence of the actively political. Both seem to me essentially expressions of impotence and despair, camouflaged as smug and self-serving displays of intellectual 'brilliance.' Especially ironic (but, of course, 'necessary') is the way in which this evolution has culminated in the currently fashionable rejection of ideology as a viable or productive concept: the school of thought unprotestingly produced by ideology now conveniently discovers that there is no such thing. And this has transpired at a time when we have learnt

(if we care to listen) that not merely our civilization, but life on this planet, is threatened with extinction if something drastic is not done, and done quickly.

Only one current in contemporary criticism has sustained a significant opposition: the feminist current eloquently represented (in the area of Hitchcock criticism) by Tania Modleski's *The Women Who Knew Too Much*. In the context of the books described above, it shines like a beacon in the darkness. I don't mean by this that I find it entirely satisfactory. There is the usual alienating shilly-shallying over the question of personal authorship (explicitly denounced at the start and then implicitly endorsed throughout), and one wishes, for once, that the book was much longer—one sorely misses chapters on, for example, *Under Capricorn* and *Marnie*. But this is a work of *criticism*, as I understand the term (i.e., neither 'scholarship'—though it has plenty of that—nor 'theory,' in which it is firmly grounded), characterized by an intimate and creative involvement with Hitchcock's texts, and acknowledging everywhere a clearly defined position (at once personal and more-than-personal) so that the reader knows precisely where this is coming from, with no misguided and disingenuous camouflage of 'objectivity.' This is another way of saying that it is essentially a political work, engaging not only with Hitchcock's texts (about which it is consistently illuminating, in ways beyond the reach of the four books discussed above) but with the continuing struggles (basically ideological) within the culture, very positively and forcefully. I find the chapters on *Rear Window* and *Vertigo* particularly fine, offering insights that I failed to reach in my own work.

I shall not embarrass the reader (or my editors) by attempting to review *Hitchcock's Films Revisited* (though I would not hesitate to do so if the book—or at least its new material—were further from me: I could produce a fairly devastating account of the original work). But it seemed to me both coy and unrealistic not to acknowledge its existence in the context of these other books. I would claim only what I attempted, without comment on the degree of success: to sustain and develop the political impulse, in a period of human history where it is so easy to cop out and succumb to despair; and to justify my claim (which many women challenge) to the honourable title of 'feminist.' Hitchcock's films remain, in their dramatization of the conflicts and tensions that characterize issues of gender and sexuality within our culture, an incomparable arena for investigations into sexual politics.

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Note: This article was commissioned, and subsequently rejected, by *Sight and Sound*.

by Martha J. Nandorfy

# *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*

SUBVERTING THE GLAZED GAZE OF  
AMERICAN MELODRAMA AND FILM THEORY

Pedro Almodóvar, the Spanish king of kitsch, has been enjoying enormous commercial success in North America and Europe but has also gotten himself into trouble with the Motion Picture Association of America over the film *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* While receiving an X rating from the association would not in itself make any film seem interestingly controversial, the fact that many feminist critics are also opposed to it does raise many interesting issues with theoretical implications.

I would like to focus on *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* because this film foregrounds the mediated nature of representation and deals explicitly with sadism and masochism in terms of both gaze and performative gender difference. An article in the *New York Times* reports that "[i]n Spain, the film has been criticized by feminists for encouraging degrading acts toward women." Sociologist Julie Bueno said that "the film should get 3 X's. It has a tremendous subliminal violence towards women. But to give it an X rating for the love scene is ridiculous." (*NY Times*, Apr. 23/90). Surprisingly enough, the X rating has nothing to do with the bondage scenes, which probably shouldn't be classified as such since they never involve sex,



but was decided on the basis of "the suggestive bath tub scene and the lovemaking scene" (*NY Times*, May 24/90).

While these kinds of verdicts—completely devoid of considerations about intentionality—are generally expected from censors, they have also characterized feminist criticism of the film which may be due, in part, to an understanding of interpretation based exclusively on the passive role of the American spectator. This passivity seems to be reinforced by psychoanalytical theories of the gaze, which, when relying heavily on conventional American cinema, cannot account for the intellectual demands and pleasures of other filmic modes.

Much recent feminist and psychoanalytical film theory is based on the dynamics of the gaze, identified with either sadism or masochism, which tends to reduce the spectator's engagement to the passive pleasure of scopophilia. These theories of the gaze have developed out of film criticism aimed primarily at Hollywood or what Laura Mulvey has referred to as "illusionistic narrative film" in which the female figure, representative of lack, is fetishized in order to mitigate men's fear of castration. This combination of illusionism and fear of castration suspends the spectator in a passive state wholly determined by the gaze.<sup>1</sup>

Pleasure, then, is considered in terms of a completely unconscious reaction to visual stimulation; it consists only in looking, and is therefore rejected by many contemporary theorists and filmmakers as a mere effect of delusion and submission to the patriarchal status quo. Mulvey goes as far as to propose the destruction of pleasure as a radical weapon.

The gaze does not only relate to the spectator's viewing but is structured around three explicitly male looks or gazes that reinforce each other's power: the gaze of the camera (since there is usually a man behind it), that of the male character within the narrative and the gaze of the male spectator (Kaplan, 30).

In an attempt to break with this oppressive structure of male dominance, Gaylyn Studlar derives a model from Gilles Deleuze's study of Sacher Masoch's writings which she interprets as empowering to women and to men, since the masochistic act culminates in the parthenogenetic rebirth of the son in an alliance with the mother. Deleuze's *Coldness and Cruelty* challenges the basic Freudian concept of male superiority and dominance, together with Lacan's ideas on the dominant role of the father in language. In "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema," Studlar takes issue with Mulvey's and Kaplan's acceptance of the male gaze's sadistic power and proposes, instead, a masochistic scopic pleasure produced by regressing to the contemplation of the mother's imago.

I propose to discuss Almodóvar's film in terms of sadism and masochism because these "perversions" and theories of the gaze relate to both the action in the film and our response as spectators. What I would like to examine is whether there is a direct and causal relation between the visual representation and the spectator's response as Mulvey, Kaplan and Studlar seem to suggest, and whether the notion of the gaze is sufficient in describing that

response. Before turning to the film, I will deal with the cinematic concept of the gaze and the perversions of sadism and masochism.

According to Freud, "the masochist wants to be treated like a small and helpless child, but, particularly, like a naughty child...one quickly discovers that [masochistic fantasies] place the subject in a characteristically female situation; they signify, that is, being castrated, or copulated with, or giving birth to a baby" ("Economic Problem of Masochism," 162). In other words, Freud believed that the masochist's fantasy revealed a latent homosexuality because the torturer is actually in disguise for the true object of desire: the father.

Gilles Deleuze thinks that this is a twisted reading of an act that means more than what it seems to: the torturer is the mother, whom the masochist disavows by subverting her traditionally inferior place.<sup>2</sup> By playing the role of the torturer, the mother acquires the phallus, and by submitting himself to being tortured, the son disavows the father's authority because what is being punished and purged is the father's resemblance in him. This act culminates in a parthenogenetic rebirth. The son subverts the Oedipus complex by fulfilling his desire with the mother, but in the end, what is most desirable is to become the new man, the man who has broken with the law of the father and the whole notion of authority.

In schematic terms, sadism relates to phallogocentrism, the father's authority and patriarchy, while masochism relates to anarchism, the subversion of authority and the birth of the new man conceived wholly by the mother. In terms of language, according to the masochistic drama, the father is ousted and plays no part in determining and ruling the symbolic order. There are, however, many problems with Deleuze's reading of masochism from a feminist point of view. First of all, the central figure, the protagonist and the author of the masochistic act, is a man. The three-fold mother is a mythical, archetypal figure and therefore it is not clear how such a figure could overturn the patriarchal dominance of the symbolic order.

While Deleuze's model does obviously overturn Freud's

1. "[A]s soon as fetishistic representation of the female image threatens to break the spell of illusion, and the erotic image on the screen appears directly (without mediation) to the spectator, the fact of fetishisation, concealing as it does castration fear, freezes the look, fixates the spectator and prevents him from achieving any distance from the image in front of him." (Mulvey, 18)

2. Deleuze's use of the word "disavowal" to describe the masochist's attitude toward both parents is somewhat confusing: "There is a disavowal of the mother by magnifying her ('symbolically the mother lacks nothing') and a corresponding disavowal of the father by degrading him ('the father is nothing.') in other words he is deprived of all symbolic function" (64). "Disavowal" would seem to refer to subverting both their traditional roles without expressing the qualitative difference of affirmation in the mother's case and negation in the father's. While this may seem to be an insignificant ambiguity, Deleuze's treatment of the mother becomes significantly ambiguous because, for the masochist, she is only a function of language and yet Deleuze suggests that his reading is a feminist revision of phallogocentric psychoanalysis. Despite the fact that the mother is the sole creator of the new man, Deleuze points out that "the mother represents the law under certain prescribed conditions; she generates the symbolism through which the masochist expresses himself. It is not a case of identification with the mother, as is mistakenly believed" (63).

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exaltation of the father's authority, his notion of the Oedipus complex, and the idea that femininity is wholly based on lacking the phallus and envying the penis, it continues to promote the male's narcissism, reflected in both his transgressive symbiotic relation with the mother, and his subsequent desexualization, which is a very familiar form rejecting the feminine as an other to be contended with. Here, Woman is once more the mythical, oceanic creator whose only role is to assist her son's liberation not only from the father, but also from other women as subjects. Furthermore, it is not clear how this conception of the oral mother would differ significantly from the way in which

patriarchal discourse has always relegated women to these idealized, crystallized roles. Does this role of coldness and cruelty not correspond exactly to the femme fatale of patriarchal cinema, even if the oral mother isn't punished in the end? Is this not just another instance of Oedipal transgression in which the son finally manages to gain access to the mother by mythologizing her?

In her article "Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema," Studlar appeals to Deleuze's account of the masochistic fantasy because, "[t]he 'masochistic model' rejects a stance that has emphasized the phallic phase and the pleasure of control or mastery, and therefore offers an

alternative to strict Freudian models that have proven to be a "dead end" for feminist-psychoanalytic theory' (269). Her reading of Deleuze focuses on the disavowal of the father, but seems to overlook the dynamics of the spectacle, the performative aspect of masochism which, in fact, covers up the control and mastery practiced by the masochist. It is important to remember that he is the author and director of the performance while the torturess is his creation and prop. Deleuze's theory appeals to her on the grounds that it "challenges the notion that male scopic pleasure must center around control—never identification with or submission to the female" (270), but I think that the masochistic fantasy according to Deleuze is much more ambiguous, for the son's submission is rewarded by pleasure and the ultimate power of rebirth.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, by concentrating wholly on the pre-Oedipal relationship between infant and mother, and the visual impact of the maternal imago as the matrix that will determine the spectator's engagement with a film, Studlar empties that engagement of ideological implications.

The notion of identification is central to all theories of the gaze, but becomes very problematic when considering ideological interpretation or response to humour and irony, given that such responses demand a certain self-conscious distancing on the spectator's part. Viewed as a mesmerized infant transported back to the bliss of the maternal breast, the spectator is denied any intellectual capacity to resist, and even to simply read what is seen and heard. The focus on the exclusively visual—in this case, the substitution of maternal imago for femme fatale—completely ignores the importance of dialogue which may in fact be insignificant in most Hollywood productions, but using these as the basis for a film theory would necessarily result in a severely impoverished notion of pleasure. This mesmerized form of pregenital identification is based on the dynamics of a certain type of cinema whose object may, in fact, be simple object cathexis, but Studlar's theory just reinforces the idiotic passivity that the American audience is supposed to embody.

Being seduced by the image of the mother instead of the femme fatale does not change film theory in any radical way. Submission to the exclusive power of the gaze is equally reactionary in either case because it denies the spectator any political agency. The very notion of identification seems to be at the root of the problem. Granted that identifying with some of the characters in a film is pleasurable and even perhaps essential to interpretation, it need not be infantile or reactionary.

Kaplan also discusses melodrama and the mechanism of identification from this "propagandistic" point of view:

We can also see how the family melodrama, as a genre geared specifically to women, functions both to expose the constraints and limitations that the capitalist nuclear family imposes on women, and at the same time, to "educate" women to accept those constraints as "natural," inevitable—as "given." (25)

This observation of the double intention or effect of melo-

drama is very interesting to consider in relation to Almodóvar's work which has, as I mentioned earlier, been described as melodramatic, but also as postmodern, complicating matters somewhat since that ambiguous term usually refers to a certain kind of self-consciousness, which nevertheless does not take itself seriously. It is important to examine the gaze in *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* to determine whether the second effect actually happens. Does this film educate women to accept those constraints as natural or inevitable, as Julia Bueno's accusation of subliminal violence would suggest?

Deleuze's study deals with the "pure" perversions represented in the works of de Sade and Sacher Masoch, which he shows to be completely asymmetrical, in direct contradiction to Freud's assertion that they are complementary. They are two different games with different rules, responding to different desires. But while Freud's gender differentiation is obviously biased and relies heavily on his conception of the inferiority of women based on their lack, his confusion of the two perversions comes closer to the common usage of the term "sadomasochism," in reference to a particular type of dynamics between a couple in which one of the partners assumes the active role of master, and the other, the passive role of slave. However this relationship is not as simple as it would first seem for each partner depends on the other and both contain active and passive elements.

This indeterminacy becomes clear very early on in *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* While Rickie occupies the most obvious position of power through sheer brute force, there are many indications that he is totally dependent on Marina. His whole life plan and construction of an identity depend on Marina's participation whether forced or voluntary. At first it is only the physical reality of bondage that puts Rickie in the master's role and reduces Marina to that of slave.

Freud claims that the libido is masculine by nature and that this one libido serves both the masculine and feminine sexual functions, but reverting to an imaginary prehistoric scenario he concludes that "[n]ature takes less careful account of the feminine function's demands than in the case of masculinity. And the reason for this may lie—thinking teleologically—in the fact that the accomplishment of the aim of biology has been entrusted to the aggressiveness of man and has been made to some extent independent of women's consent" (131). I say that this is an imaginary prehistoric scenario because it only takes into account pure physical strength and ignores the complexity of desire. Freud almost proposes rape as the model of the elemental fulfilment of the reproductive function without considering that rape is also a complex act of desire aimed at destruction and not procreation.

While there is no rape in *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, Freud's reductive scheme is useful in understanding Rickie's psychotic behaviour. The elemental act of copulating is socialized into the desire to marry and raise a family. His entire plan depends on forcibly subjecting Marina to his desire, which is quite a complex one, considering that it demands that his desire also become hers. Marina assumes that he only wants to rape her but when she asks him to get it over with, he tells her that they will not fuck until the time

is right; he waits for her to first fall in love with him. Dominating her physically would not be satisfying enough for him because what he desperately needs is recognition, clearly rendered specular here even through the insistent use of mirrors, producing a "socialized" version of Lacanian misrecognition. Lacan himself comments on love in terms of this form of specular identification when he says that meaning indicates the direction in which it fails and that love disfigures that failing in the reflection of like to like (F.S., 46-47).

Rickie has a very definite agenda which he represents graphically as the subway line of his life. This map traces his trajectory from his sad origins, the orphanage where he was sent at the age of three, through the various stages of degradation; reform school at eight, and then, on to the mental asylum from where he escaped one night and went to a bar called Lulu, where his destiny changes because of his supposed meeting and one night stand with Marina. Even though she is literally subjected to his authority, his story demands that she hold the keys to his salvation, like the mother of God.

The movie opens with the mural on the wall of the apartment where Marina will eventually end up. The three upper panels depict the Virgin Mary and the three lower ones, Christ. Both figures hold their hands in a cupped position around the sacred heart. The soundtrack is of a heartbeat and the inscription below the mural reads "Sacre cœur de Marie." The painting over Marina's bed in her own apartment is also a biblical scene of Christ surrounded by lambs. These traditional images provide oblique suggestions as to why Marina plays a central role in Rickie's illusions and how she eventually accepts that role; there seems to be a significant connection between masochism in the Freudian sense, maternal compassion and the religious myths that propagate the association of certain characteristics with femininity.

The most disturbing aspect of this film is Marina's acceptance of the role created for her by her captor. But to say, like many critics, that this is subliminal violence against women is, I think, to overlook the film's very critique of patriarchy. First of all, the violence is hardly subliminal, it is hyperbolically explicit. What is perhaps subliminal (although that is not the appropriate term) is, as I will argue, that this violence is a physical, parodic representation of the violence inherent in sexual relationships within a patriarchal society. It all depends on whether the spectator responds passively to the representation of violence or whether the intentionality of that representation is interpreted.

According to Kaplan, psychoanalysis is an important tool with which to unlock the secrets of socialization within (capitalist) patriarchy and the semiotic analysis of a film reveals how the signs reflect the patriarchal unconscious:

[A]ll Hollywood films...require what Brooks considers essential to melodrama, namely "a social order to be purged, a set of ethical imperatives to be made clear...important for our purposes here is his comment that the melodramatic form deals with "the processes of repression and the status of repressed content." (25)

Citing Laura Mulvey she says that "if melodrama is important in bringing ideological contradictions to the surface, and in being made for a female audience, events are never reconciled at the end in ways beneficial to women" (26). While the ending of *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* is clearly not beneficial to Marina, it is necessary to ask whether this is due to unconscious patriarchal desire on the part of Almodóvar, or to a conscious critique of how relationships function in patriarchy. Kaplan asks women: "Why do we find our objectification and surrender pleasurable?" (26) This question is again based on the assumption that we as female spectators inevitably identify with the heroine and that since she is a construct and an object of the sadistic, male gaze, we must suffer the alienating and masochistic pleasure of watching our own degradation. This view of identification as necessarily fetishistic leaves no room for resistance or any kind of critical and conscious distance.

It is important to notice that in *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, Marina is fetishized by specific men whose gaze is explicitly identified. One of the predominant techniques used in this film to foreground this mediation is the shooting of another film entitled "Midnight Phantom" within the main narrative. This second rate horror flick is directed by "Máximo Espejo" whose name would translate to "Ultimate" or "Great Mirror." While Máximo's camera and impotent gaze turn Marina into a fetish object, Almodóvar does not, and there is no reason to identify with her on that specular level. The toilet scene is a good case in point. Is this a degrading position for Marina to be seen in? Ask whether it caters to the male gaze. One male critic actually complained about her sex appeal plummeting to zero. It does not seem to be a male fantasy to watch an angry woman hurling accusations at a man while she sits on the toilet. This unusual pose is a sign of *not* idealizing the woman as fetish object; we all know that idealized women never go to the bathroom except to powder their noses. The disappointed critic seemed to imply that Almodóvar just doesn't understand how to film women, presumably because he is gay and therefore doesn't know what's sexy for the heterosexual male, who is presumably the consumer of the film. But women critics who accuse Almodóvar of projecting his homosexual and even perverse fantasies on heterosexual relationships are just as misguided. They too are assuming that what you see on the screen is aimed at producing male pleasure because in response to Kaplan's question it has become expected that yes, the gaze is male. But this is to fall under the completely uncritical sway of the all-encompassing gaze without paying any attention to the film's preoccupation with different types of gazes.

There is no one dominant gaze mastering and fetishizing

3. Studlar conflates identification and submission. As I mention in the previous note citing Deleuze himself: "It is not a case of identification with the mother" (63). Furthermore, Studlar doesn't seem to understand that the masochist's submission is a performance done in bad faith:

Disavowal, suspense and fantasy should be regarded as forms or aspects of humor. The masochist is insolent in his obsequiousness, rebellious in his submission, he is a humorist, a logician of consequences...he stands guilt on its head by making punishment into a condition that makes possible the forbidden pleasure. (89)

Marina, and no reason why we as women spectators should identify with her throughout the film regardless of ideological problems. By the same token, there is no reason for men to identify with Rickie and to imitate his gaze, and to sadistically fetishize Marina. I would say that contrary to Mulvey's conclusion, most women do not find Marina's objectification and surrender pleasurable. They find it outrageous and offensive but this reaction cannot be directed against Almodóvar. The ending of *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* is neither masochistically nor sadistically pleasurable, precisely because the sustained critique of the sado-masochistic

relationship does not cater to or flatter either sex and by the end, instead of passively identifying with either of the characters, we are asking "how can this be?," which is the film's central question. Some would grant that the film does raise that question—how can Marina's conversion be explained?—but that it offers no answer. While neither the three-fold male gaze nor the masochistic gaze theory could answer the question, the various situated gazes in the film are ideologically charged and invite more than a passive submission or regression to an infantile stage of identification.



A schematic plot summary of this film would sound like a perverted version of the traditional melodrama: Boy falls in love with girl. Feisty girl resists. Boy persists by tying her to the bed and waiting for her to come to her senses and fall in love with him. It works. They get married and presumably live happily ever after. Most melodramas follow exactly the same structure, but without the physical brutality and pleasure made so explicit in Almodóvar's film. This plot summary is, however, completely useless because it excludes the details that subvert the traditional ideological message of melodrama. The male protagonist's usual suave and convincing appeal is represented in *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* as psychosis. It is no coincidence that the first scene takes place in a mental asylum. Despite the fact that Rickie is released on the basis of a psychiatrist's report of his recovery, most of his subsequent actions are an ironical conflation of psychotic symptoms and what Freud takes to be normal male behaviour.

According to Freud "the sexuality of most male human beings contains an element of aggressiveness—a desire to subjugate; the biological significance of it seems to lie in the need for overcoming the resistance of the sexual object by means other than the process of wooing" ("Three Essays on Sexuality," 157–58). Now, to be fair to Rickie, it should be noted that he does make a lame effort to woo Marina by doing a headstand and walking on his hands, but when this infantile performance elicits only a perplexed smile, he resorts to violence. Before breaking into her apartment, he violates her privacy by rummaging through her dressing room at the studio. He steals some money and a set of handcuffs which he will later use on her, examines her panties and then atones for this by leaving a box of chocolates in her bag. This violation illustrates most of the registers of aggressivity identified by Lacan: lesional (physical intrusion), abusive (distortion of intention), profanatory (violation of intimacy), and persecutive (spying and intimidation); the last register—revenge (damage and exploitation)—will manifest itself once Rickie has sequestered Marina (*Écrits*, 16–17).

Rickie also helps himself to a long wig which he dons immediately and then prowls around the movie set to the accompaniment of suspense music. His appearance brings to mind a Neanderthal, a very appropriate look for what I called the prehistoric scenario of Freud's interpretation of gender roles. The music combined with Rickie's whole attitude will also be indirectly referred to by Máximo Espejo who comments that sometimes it is very difficult to tell the difference between a love story and a horror story. He is literally the caveman stalking his prey as he follows Marina around watching her from a safe distance while observing all her fine attributes. The scene with the mule seems especially significant seen through his eyes, because it foreshadows the turning point in Marina's resistance. Her concern for the lame animal and her homespun expertise on how to cure its hoof will be duplicated in the decisive scene in which she washes Rickie's wounds and accepts her role as Mater Dolorosa, and Rickie's as the Saviour and son.

We learn in the studio that Marina is a ex-porno star and a not completely reformed junkie. She is currently working as the star of the horror movie "Midnight Phantom" whose

original ending was to be a death scene in which Marina would be stabbed in the head. The director, Máximo, obviously depends on her more than just professionally and when his desire gets in the way, he resists closure and leaves the ending and Marina literally hanging. She flings herself out of a window in order to escape an ex-lover who comes for her from beyond the grave, and ends up swinging back and forth from a rope in the pouring rain, a recurring image which seems to encapsulate Marina's fate. While Máximo continually subjects Marina to his voyeuristic and sadistic gaze, he also plays a father figure who feels compelled to protect her. The three male characters—Máximo, Rickie, and the phantom—are all potentially or actively threatening figures who nevertheless see themselves as benefactors.

The film within the film is perhaps the most explicit, despite being the most ludicrous, representation of the threat posed by the "caring" male. In true horror-porno parody, the phantom looks like a body builder dressed in a gladiator outfit with an iron mask covering his head. When Marina asks him to remove it, he replies that he can't because he doesn't have a face but that his body is full of life. He grabs her by the wrist and tells her that he is taking her to a silent and peaceful place to which she responds: "You only offer me death and death rarely brings happiness." The connection between this kitsch horror scene and the main narrative of *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* only becomes apparent in retrospect, once Rickie has set up the master-slave relationship with Marina which, from his point of view, is simply the means to the end of marital bliss.

The demand of the dead male literally represented by the masked phantom brings to mind Lacan's observation that "If there is no virility which castration does not consecrate, then for the woman it is a castrated lover or a dead man (or even both at the same time) who hides behind the veil where he calls on her adoration from that same place beyond the maternal imago which sent out the threat of a castration not really concerning her" (F.S., 65).

It is the notion of specularity and the demand for recognition as a basis for specular identification which makes some of Lacan's observations very relevant in relation to *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* The use of mirrors in this film usually marks decisive points of identification between the two characters and also establishes that presence is representation and always entails specularity.

The first mirror reflection of Rickie wearing the wig and playing his guitar represents him as the macho hero who is about to start pursuing his prey. Once he has literally subjected Marina by tying her to her bed, she manages to convince him that she has to see a doctor for her toothache. He unties her and orders her to put make-up on her bruised face, while he sticks a fake mustache on his. They are standing side by side in front of the bathroom mirror and he comments on how much he likes being like this, getting ready together "like a married couple stepping out." The paranoid alienation of the mirror stage which, according to Lacan, dates from the deflection of the specular "I" into the social "I" is ideologically contextualized in this scene as the alienation of the social "we," the married couple. The bondage is

just another form of representing this arrangement.

Examining the disjunction between visual violence and Rickie's self-justifying discourse is very important in the interpretation of the bondage scenes and demonstrates that the notion of the gaze cannot account for the spectator's response to the ironical representation of the male's position. Much of the humour in this film is generated by Rickie's pathologically contradictory shifts from affectionate dependence on Marina to his violent retaliations when she resists his narrative. He constantly justifies his violence on the grounds of having warned Marina what the consequences of her resistance would be. The first term of the conflict never enters his reasoning, for the whole sordid plan originates in his desire and recognizes no other reason. At one point Marina confronts him screaming furiously: "Who asked you to protect me or to be my husband and be the father of my kids?" In spite of being in the somewhat vulnerable position of sitting on the toilet under Rickie's helpful supervision (he runs the tap to help her pee), Marina is completely assertive and calls him a clown. Rickie is mortally wounded by her scathing words and retreats to the bedroom crying. While tying her up and gagging her, he delivers a self-righteous speech about how hard done by he feels: "I know you've got problems," he says, "but put yourself in my shoes. Imagine how I felt about what you said to me in the bathroom. After all I did for you. I've been mistreated but never that badly. Anyway...if you could only think a little about others." This is, of course, a monologue since Marina's mouth is now taped shut and she is again tied up; she is nevertheless supposed to feel guilty about rebelling and grateful for all he had done for her, which probably refers to the typically masculine competence of getting a new washer for the kitchen faucet and a gentler tape for her mouth.

The bondage is always a representation of Rickie's violent measures to repress Marina thereby creating an imaginary reality in which she has no say.

*Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* focuses not so much on the woman's masochistic position, as on her subjection and the psychotic structure of male desire which puts her in that position. According to Lacan, the woman's position in the sexual relation is "that of a symptom for the man, which serves to ward off the unconscious, and to ensure the consistency of his relation to the phallic term" (F.S., 162). The male project, however, depends on a certain degree of reinforcement from the woman in the form of specular identification and the erasure of her own desire which must be confounded and ultimately replaced by his.

The imaginary turning point for Rickie is the one night stand with Marina, marked on his map as Lulu. Reviewing his "subway line of life," he claims that from then on he only thinks of her, gets well, is released and is now simply fulfilling this trajectory which in some ways seems to be preordained because narrated. She is his salvation and there is another specular moment in the film when she accepts this role and in doing so "chooses" to love him. This moment again takes place in front of the mirror. Rickie has gone out on a loving mission to get Marina more drugs, tape and rope, when he is attacked by a gang of thugs for

having previously robbed a drug dealer. The scene of Rickie being brutally beaten in an alleyway alternates with the simultaneous scene of Marina back at the apartment struggling to free herself by burning the rope she is tied up with. She almost succeeds when he returns bruised, bleeding and totally pathetic. Even though Marina is Rickie's prisoner, there is a curious identification of suffering when it is now he who is the victim.

This is a pivotal mirror scene when Rickie remembers a moment from his past and Marina, overwhelmed by a sense of compassion, stops treating him as the enemy. She takes some disinfectant and cotton and cleanses his wounds while Rickie, amazed by this demonstration of tenderness, watches her in the mirror. The specular image suddenly produces the long lost memory of his mother shaving his father on the back porch; the only thing he has ever remembered about his parents. At this Marina is moved to tears and completely assumes the identification of the Mater Dolorosa; the image of her cleansing his wounds while crying, duplicating the Christian iconography of the painting over the bed.

Most theories of masochism acknowledge a religious or transcendent component usually associated with the notion of sacrifice.<sup>4</sup> In a similar vein, René Girard proposes a triangular model of desire in which the third term is occupied by the mediator:

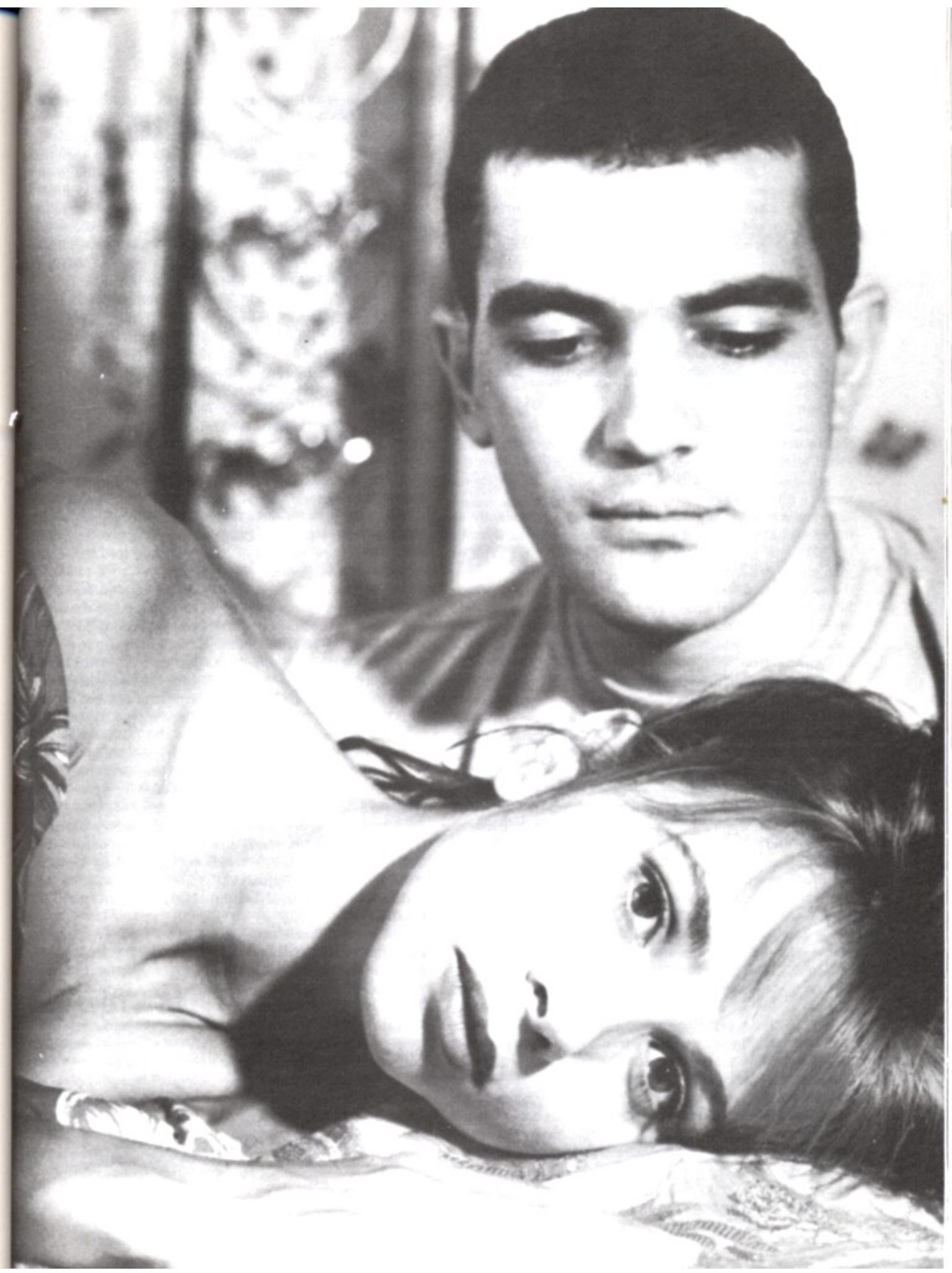
Every victim of metaphysical desire, including the masochist, covets his mediator's divinity, and for this divinity he will accept if necessary—and it is always necessary—or even seek out, shame, humiliation, and suffering. He hopes that misery and suffering will reveal to him the person whom he should imitate in order to free himself of his wretched condition. (182)

In Marina's case the mediator would be the imago of the Virgin Mary and, by extension, the mother. It is upon seeing herself reflected in this role that she loses her autonomy and accepts the role assigned to her by Rickie who is reflected as the suffering Christ. But perhaps these theories of metaphysical desire and guilt continue to be too biased because they usually refer to male masochism, and analyze that attitude from a narcissistic and logocentric point of view which does not allow for the possibility of compassion and sacrifice, except in terms of perversion.

Taking issue with Freud's interpretations of the Oedipus complex and penis envy in girls, Nancy Chodorow's reading of the dynamics of individuation and the acquisition of gender roles questions the phallocentric view of masochism. She shifts the meaning given to women's secondariness by

4. This religious dimension, according to Lacan, plays an important role in the woman's subjection to the conjugal bond:

For her, there's something insurmountable, let us say unacceptable, in the fact of being placed in the position of an object in the symbolic order...it is indeed because she has a relation of the second degree to this symbolic order that the god is embodied in man or man in the god...[In other words, in the primitive form of marriage, if a woman isn't given, or doesn't give herself, to a god, to something transcendent, the fundamental relation suffers every form of imaginary degradation. (*Seminar*, 262)]



Lacan by reinterpreting how boys and girls experience the Oedipus complex and how this difference makes girls more independent and yet more connected to others.<sup>5</sup> According to this interpretation of femininity, Marina's subjection demands taking into consideration more than just the effects of specularity, the mediation of the divine imago, and masochism of any kind. While these phenomena are strongly marked in the film through the use of mirrors and paintings, Marina's compassion and capacity for love cannot be completely reduced to either conscious or unconscious effects of masochism. The mirror and the association with the Virgin render this scene specular but, at the same time, Marina's reaction reflects her capacity to see the other as a subject and in this she differs radically from Rickie whose methods have shown all along that he treats Marina not as a subject, but rather as a necessary mythicized object in the construction of his own self. Marina's identity must be destroyed in order to mould her in the image of his specular vision of the couple. I would argue that while Marina's role in the film is central and provokes a lot of discussion about feminine masochism, the film deals mainly with the paranoiac structure of Rickie's desire, and in more general terms, with men's aggressivity and will to dominate.

Freud's three categories of masochism relate wholly to the masochist without taking into consideration the dynamics between that subject and others. The first type of masochism is the erotogenic, consisting of pleasure in pain, the second is an "expression of the feminine nature," which he says is "the most accessible to observation and the least problematic" and the third is moral masochism arising from "a sense of guilt which is mostly unconscious and devoid of any connection with what we recognize as sexuality" ("Economic Problem: Masochism," 161). His contemptuous dismissal of the simplicity of feminine masochism, together with his denial of a moral capacity in women, prevents him from examining the overlapping features of feminine and moral masochism. Freud ignores the sense of guilt instilled in women by men, so well represented in Rickie's self-righteous accusations of Marina.

There is no sign of erotogenic masochism in *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!*, despite the controversial association between bondage and what is popularly known as S&M. It is Marina who initiates the sexual relationship right after expressing her love by responding to Rickie's suffering. She is not only not tied up during the sex scene, but is also in full control, making all the demands and enjoying most of the pleasure given that Rickie's wounds inhibit his participation and enjoyment. This scene is also rendered specular by being reflected in a huge mirrored ceiling that fragments and multiplies their bodies. It is during their lovemaking that Marina claims to remember Rickie, thereby giving some meaning to the act and legitimizing his subway line of life.

In reading Almodóvar's film, it is important to note that self-recognition as misrecognition has to do with social conditioning and the tyranny of social conventions. The ironical treatment of society suggests that the dead-end relationship between men and women is not inevitable in either natural or normative terms. Marina seems to resign herself to her fate and the tiny circle of the apartment where they live cut

off from others as the typical neurotic couple. They prepare meals together and eat them in front of the TV, where we get to see a significant commercial for a retirement plan. The commercial criticizes the Spaniards for being lazy hedonists who squander their earnings and tango through life to end up as senior citizen beggars, in comparison to the visionary and orderly nazis who start saving their pennies for retirement when they are eighteen. Rickie's plans for the future are simply unremarkable. He hopes to have several kids and maybe go to Australia in search of work. Marina's future is summed up by the movie she watches on TV: "Night of the Living Dead." This again reminds the spectator of the "Midnight Phantom" in which Marina is threatened by a dead lover who wants to take her to a peaceful place; marriage seems to be that place.

The most ambiguous moment in the film comes when Rickie goes out to steal a car so that they can take a trip to his hometown, and lets Marina decide whether she wants to be tied up or not. "If you're untied will you escape?" he asks her, to which she replies "I don't know, you better tie me up." Logically, the act of bondage has become a mere formality, a daily habit, since she could either lie and escape or accept her psychological bondage and choose to remain without being bound and gagged. It is this ambiguity which underscores the fact that bondage in this film is a physical metaphor for the tyranny of marriage portrayed as a sadomasochistic arrangement.

When Marina's sister finally discovers and frees her, Marina gathers up the tools of Rickie's seduction: the drawings, the map and the box of chocolates and proclaims that she loves him. The telling of the kidnapping story to her sister gives Marina the opportunity to rewrite history from Rickie's point of view. She admits, for instance, that Rickie did beat her when he broke into her apartment, but quickly adds that he didn't mean to. In having adopted the maternal role, Marina must now protect Rickie and make excuses for his behaviour. Lacan tells an amusing anecdote about how this type of arrangement came to be so prevalent in Western society (although it may be much more widespread). He refers to a "a very remarkable trial of a case of poisoning in Rome, from whence it transpired that in every patrician family it was par for the course for women to poison their husbands, and that they were dropping like flies" (*Seminar*, 263). To remedy the situation, Lacan suggests that women had to be taught to treat their husbands as children so as not to kill them.<sup>6</sup>

This option, like masochism, seems to involve compassion and caring but at the same time ironically subverts the moral imperative by suggesting that women sublimate their power and fury in order to tolerate men.

The last scene of *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* takes place in the car in which Marina and her sister have retrieved Rickie from his deserted hometown and take him to meet their mother. Both women have accepted Rickie despite all his obvious shortcomings and pathological behaviour. Rickie and his soon-to-be sister-in-law sing along to a song on the radio about solitude, fear and haunting memories. The refrain: "resistiré para seguir viviendo," translated in the subtitles to "I will survive," is the final irony. Marina drives

the car smiling ambivalently through her tears. It is not clear who she is crying for, but by having renounced her own desire in an act called love, the question loses its significance.

Many feminist critiques have completely overlooked the irony with which Almodóvar represents Rickie's love as having the structure of psychosis. One of the reasons for this might be that they assume, like the theorists of the gaze discussed earlier, that the spectator is also purely an effect of specularity and has no choice but to identify with the imagoes without being able to interpret the dynamics of the master-slave relationship. A certain amount of identification with Marina is inevitable and necessary. We can probably all recognize her compassion, her pleasure and growing intimacy that the situation breeds even while exercising the critical distance which tells us that she is deluded and trapped. Furthermore, we are not in this case victims of the male gaze and Rickie's obvious narcissistic identification, because neither of the characters is fetishized by the gaze of the camera. It is the characters' gradual and complex fetishization of each other which the spectator can observe at a critical distance as the story of their alienation, a subverted representation of the love story.

Almodóvar's film represents how the woman is subjected not because she is a born victim, but because cultural conditioning and psychotic patterns associated with masculine behaviour, also socially conditioned, are difficult obstacles to overcome. This reading of the film depends, however, on the spectator's ideological agency. When considered to be either a mesmerized infant who submits to the masochistic pleasure of contemplating the great mother, or the sadistic and narcissistic male who fetishizes and destroys the femme fatale, the spectator is a powerless victim of patriarchal dominance. We cannot hope to deconstruct the mechanism of phallogocentric discourse if we continue to buy into the myths about female lack or even the fear of castration as the cause of male sadism.

While psychoanalytical approaches to film theory and criticism continue to produce invaluable insights, the biased tenets of phallocentric psychoanalysis must be changed in order to finally say something intelligent about feminine sexuality instead of dismissing it as inherently flawed and inferior. When simply assimilated as the formative principles of film theory, these male biases undermine the feminist project by perpetrating the domination-submission power structure as if it were a natural given. I can only agree with Mulvey's concluding remark that women "cannot view the decline of traditional film form with anything much more than sentimental regret" (18), but even this kind of regret seems to be excessive and misplaced. This is not to say (as Mulvey seems to) that we must renounce pleasure. When freed from the phallocentric binary structures of domination-submission, sadism-masochism, pleasure is not reduced, but given much greater potential. Cinematic pleasure is not necessarily limited to the glazed gaze of either masochistic regression or sadistic voyeurism for, like all texts, film is produced in cultural and ideological contexts that engage the spectator, and while part of the engagement works at an unconscious level, this should not be sufficient grounds to deny active, intellectual pleasure.

5. "Men's and women's understanding of difference, and gender difference, must thus be understood in the relational context in which these are created. They stem from the respective relation of boys and girls to their mother, who is their primary caretaker, love-object, and object of identification, and who is a woman in a sexually and gender-organized world. This relational context contrasts profoundly for girls and boys in a way that makes difference, and gender difference, central for males—one of the earliest, most basic male developmental issues—and not central for females" (Chodorow, 111).

Freud maintains that the Oedipus complex is more difficult for girls since they must shift from the homosexual love for the mother to the heterosexual object choice. This interpretation does away with the mother for the proper development of both sexes. The girl comes to hate her mother for not having provided her with a penis, and the boy must renounce his mother in order to grow. Freud does not acknowledge the mother's ongoing significance in the healthy development of children of both sexes.

Chodorow's interpretation of gender difference suggests that the need to overcome the mother as a psychological obstacle has no objective basis and is only another symptom of male anxiety and narcissism: "...because men have power and cultural hegemony in our society, a notable thing happens. Men use and have used this hegemony to appropriate and transform these experiences" (referring to the fact that "developmentally, the maternal identification represents and is experienced as generically human for children of both genders"). "Both in everyday life and in theoretical and intellectual formations, men have come to define maleness as that which is basically human, and to define women as not men" (Chodorow, 111).

6. "Along this path, we've come full circle, we are returning to the state of nature. That's the conception some people entertain of the legitimate intervention of psychoanalysis into what is called human relations, and which, disseminated through the mass media, teaches all and sundry how to behave so that there's peace at home—the woman plays the role of the mother, and the man that of the child" (*Seminar*, 263).

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# Melodramatic Narrative

ORPHANS OF THE STORM AND THE SEARCHERS

Despite the many books and articles on melodrama which have proliferated over the last twenty years, there does not seem to have been much discussion of narrative and melodrama, and whether certain sorts of narrative may be characterised as 'melodramatic.' I would like to propose a start in this direction by tracing the remarkable links which may be established between the narratives of D. W. Griffith's *Orphans of the Storm* (1922) and John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), and then opening up to consider whether the patterns discerned have a more general significance.

freely reworked ideas from Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution* (1837) concerning the real-life Danton and Robespierre, who are not even mentioned in the Dickens novel.<sup>1</sup> In effect, Griffith—who wrote the screenplay under a pseudonym—transposed D'Ennery's play to the period before and during the French Revolution which, like the American Civil War in *Birth of a Nation* (1915), provided a suitably dramatic setting for

by Michael Walker

*Orphans of the Storm* comes directly out of the 19th century melodramatic tradition. The primary sources from which its narrative derives are Adolphe D'Ennery's stage melodrama *Les Deux Orphelines* (1874) and Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), together with

1. I read in *The Films of D. W. Griffith* by Edward Wagenknecht and Anthony Slide (Crown Publishers, 1975) that "Only the incident of the child destroyed by De Praille's coach is taken directly from *A Tale of Two Cities*" (p 182). On the contrary, whole sets of relationships in *Orphans* are clearly modelled on the Dickens novel: in the way he interacts with the personal story, Danton parallels Carton (each unrequitedly loves the heroine, and ultimately sacrifices himself to give the other characters a happy ending); Henriette parallels Lucie; the Chevalier parallels Darnay; Louise parallels Dr Manette; Jacques Forget-Not parallels Madame DeFarge; and De Vaudrey, the Chevalier's great uncle, parallels Evrémonde, Darnay's uncle. Thus Louise is abandoned as a child by the same De Vaudrey who tortures and kills Jacques Forget-Not's father, just as Dr Manette is unjustly imprisoned by the same Evrémondes who murder the family of Madame DeFarge. This leads to an identical 'coincidence' in both stories: the loved ones of Louise and Dr Manette fall in love with a descendant of this original tyrant and, during the revolution, this descendant is threatened with death because of the murderous past deeds of the tyrant. In short, the incorporations from Dickens are highly sophisticated: I have only summarised the basic points.

From *Orphans of the Storm*, moments before the reconnaissance: Henriette (Lillian Gish) sees Louise (Dorothy Gish) singing in the street below.





From *Orphans of the Storm*, Henriette (Lillian Gish) abducted to the 'revel' of the Marquis de Praille (Morgan Wallace), right centre. The Chevalier (Joseph Schildkraut), left centre, shows he is a 'man of honour' and sets about rescuing her.

for his narrative. As in many silent melodramas, an opening legend spells out the moral: that the two orphans suffer just as much under the "Anarchy and Bolshevism" of the Revolution as they did under the "tyranny" of the aristocratic rule which preceded it, and the film is full of paralleled scenes which emphasise that message. On the assumption that readers of *Cineaction* will be reasonably familiar with the story of *The Searchers*, but may be less so with that of *Orphans of the Storm*, I will sketch in the essential details of its extremely complex plot.

The film begins with violence: the aristocratic De Vaudrey, enraged that his daughter should have married a commoner, kills her husband and has the child of the marriage torn from her mother's arms and abandoned (in the snow) "on the foundling steps" of Notre Dame. A man, Girard, so impoverished he has come to abandon his own

baby, takes pity on the plight of the child and returns home with both babies. Rewarded with money in the clothes of baby Louise—her name recorded in the locket which, as in all such melodramas, will later serve to identify her—Girard and his wife move to the country, where Louise and their own daughter Henriette grow up together. These events are located in a prologue: the film then moves forward to the point where Henriette (Lillian Gish) and Louise (Dorothy Gish) have become "the two orphans," and the plague which killed Henriette's parents has also made Louise blind. Her dependence ("as helpless as a baby") means that Henriette has now also become a mother-figure to her, a feature which the film repeatedly stresses. In the meantime, Louise's actual mother (Katharine Emmett) has been forced to marry the Count de Linières, the Prefect of Police of Paris (Frank Losee), who knows nothing of her past.

Seeking a cure for Louise's blindness, the two young women set out for Paris. On arrival they are promptly subjected to a succession of villainies. Henriette is abducted and taken to the "revel" (euphemism for orgy) of the Marquis de Praille (Morgan Wallace), who clearly intends to rape her. Louise, abruptly abandoned, is saved from walking into the Seine by Pierre Frochard (Frank Puglia), a knife grinder, but is then immediately taken in hand by Pierre's mother, La Frochard (Lucille La Verne), a "disreputable old scoundrel." To La Frochard, Louise's blindness makes her exploitable, and she forces her—incarcerating her in the rat cellar until she submits—to beg for them. In addition, La Frochard's criminal elder son Jacques (Sheldon Lewis) eyes Louise lasciviously. Pierre is sympathetic to her, but he is a weak, cowed figure, and he looks on helplessly.

Although Henriette is rescued from the revel by the young hero, Chevalier De Vaudrey (Joseph Schildkraut)—coincidentally, the Countess's nephew and hence Louise's cousin—Louise remains enslaved to La Frochard, begging on the streets, and much of the central part of the film is taken up by Henriette's attempts to find her. (Griffith keeps the sexual threat to her temporarily—if improbably—in abeyance.) It's at this point that the historical figures of Danton (Monte Blue) and Robespierre (Sidney Herbert) are woven into the personal as well as the political story. Henriette shelters Danton from some royalist soldiers and he is shown to have romantic feelings towards her; Robespierre—characterized as a hardline sexual puritan—takes a dislike to her because, slamming her door in his face, she denies him the prurient satisfaction of finding Danton in her room and so uncovering what to him is an immoral liaison. In the meantime, in one of the familiar 'call of the blood' scenes of 19th century melodrama, Louise begs (in the snow) outside Notre Dame and the Countess, seeing her, is "stirred by a strange sympathy." (One of the film's many instances paralleling the tyranny of the lower classes with that of the aristocrats. Louise is unfortunate in the sites chosen for her suffering: it only snows outside Notre Dame.)

The climactic sequence of *Orphans* is the balcony/street re-meeting of the two sisters. At the instigation of the Chevalier, who loves Henriette, the Countess visits her. In fact, mindful of her own disastrous cross-class marriage, the Countess tries to persuade Henriette not to pursue the love affair. (The King has arranged a suitable aristocratic match for the Chevalier.) But, whilst she is in Henriette's upstairs room, the Countess learns of the latter's search for her 'sister,' and realises—Henriette conveniently happens to be wearing the locket—that Louise is her own daughter. At that moment, as if conjured up by the wishes of the two women, Louise is in the street below, singing. Henriette hears her, goes to the balcony, recognises her and calls out but, as she tries to leave the room, the Count—using his own methods to break up Henriette's relationship with the Chevalier—bursts in with armed men and arrests her. The Countess swoons dead away, Henriette is taken into custody and Louise, frantically running around in the street, is recaptured by La Frochard.

The scene is unquestionably one of the great climaxes of

Griffith's cinema: rarely has a melodramatic scene expressed so powerfully the generally crucial opposition between the desires of the women and the blind, dogmatic repressiveness of the men. The Count enters Henriette's apartment and sees his wife: there is no question of enquiring what she is doing here, and why she is so excited and attempting to moderate his course of action. Nor does he offer any explanation for his extraordinary behaviour. He ignores his wife, and brushes aside Henriette's pleadings about Louise. His is the authority of patriarchy which, faced with any sort of opposition, merely seeks to repress the more fiercely. As Henriette throws herself against the large soldier who bars her exit, the man registers outrage at this assault on his person and, puffing himself up with authority, seeks angrily to suppress her attack. The mindless reflex of male repressiveness is beautifully caught.

Thrown by the Count into the "prison for fallen women," Henriette is freed at the outbreak of the revolution only to be re-arrested by the lower-class villain Jacques Forget-Not (Leslie King). In his pursuit of vengeance against the De Vaudrey family (his father was tortured to death by the same De Vaudrey who killed Louise's father), Jacques Forget-Not has followed the Chevalier to Henriette's room. In one of the film's key paralleled scenes (echoing the Count bursting into Henriette's room with royalist soldiers and arresting her), he bursts into her room with revolutionary soldiers and arrests the two of them. In the meantime, just as the Chevalier had earlier rescued Henriette from the sexual threat of De Praille, Pierre has finally rescued Louise from the sexual threat of Jacques. These scenes, too, are very closely paralleled: with the sexual abandon of the revel going on in the background, the aristocrats fight with swords and the Chevalier wounds De Praille; with the sexual abandon of "the dance of the mob," the *carmagnole*, going on in the background, the lower-class brothers fight with knives and Pierre wounds Jacques. (Griffith has held back Jacques' sexual threat to Louise *until* the *carmagnole*—the release of lower-class sexual energy—is being danced, to further emphasise the parallel.)

The Chevalier and Henriette are put on trial before the highly volatile "People's Tribunal." Louise and Pierre are then swept into the hall as the trial is taking place—leading to another frustrated reunion between the sisters. The Chevalier is condemned for being an aristocrat, Henriette for sheltering him, although Robespierre's intervention—alleging that Henriette is an immoral woman—is shown to be crucial. Both are sentenced to the guillotine. Only Danton—the dominant hero of the personal story as well as of the revolution—can save them. He makes an impassioned speech to change the Tribunal's mind and, in a rather over-extended sequence leading up to a last-second rescue, saves Henriette (and the Chevalier) from the guillotine, and reunites the sisters. The film ends, after the revolution, with the formation of a new family: the Countess and a reformed Count as parent-figures, and Louise, cured of her blindness, giving her blessing for Henriette to marry the Chevalier.

Finally, to correct a common misapprehension about the film, Pierre is *not* destined to marry Louise at the end. Even

though he saves Louise just as the Chevalier saves Henriette, he is blocked by his class position. As a woman, Henriette can marry into the old aristocracy; as a man, Pierre cannot. To conceal the class blockage, Pierre is conspicuously de-heroised: his cowed personality, his lame leg. Even though he *also* saves Henriette (but for his timely intervention in stabbing the executioner, Danton would not have reached the guillotine in time), Pierre is kept in his place. His reward at the end is a decent set of clothes and a promise from the Countess that "his welfare will be her special concern." As Pierre bows his delighted thanks, Picard (Creighton Hale), the Chevalier's servant and comic relief throughout, does a caricaturing jig immediately behind him. The penultimate shot of the film (a group shot of all those accorded a happy ending) shows Pierre and Picard in animated conversation. Clearly, that is Pierre's destiny: to become, like Picard, a favoured servant.

In its improbable coincidences and sudden reversals of fortune, its constant stream of threats and villainies, its suspenseful climaxes and last-minute rescues, *Orphans* is clearly an example of melodramatic narrative. Before analysing this, however, I would like to look at the film's close structural and narrative links with *The Searchers*. In each film there is a 'divided world,' divided between a dominant group (aristocracy; whites) and an oppressed group (lower classes; Indians).<sup>2</sup> And, although each film shows key representatives of the oppressed group in a negative light—Scar (Henry Brandon)'s massacring of whites the equivalent of Jacques Forget-Not's massacring of aristocrats (which Griffith rather bloodily shows in one scene)—it nevertheless provides a reason for this figure's violence in the history of persecution by the dominant group: the torturing to death of Jacques Forget-Not's father; the killing by whites of Scar's sons. Moreover, each film also shows key representatives of the dominant group as viciously oppressive: De Vaudrey, De Praille and the Count in *Orphans*, Ethan (John Wayne) in *The Searchers*.

In the 'pre-history' of each film (prologue in *Orphans*; pre-narrative in *The Searchers*) there is then an abandoned child (Louise; Martin), adopted by a family, growing up as a member of that family. (The first thing we learn about Martin/Jeffrey Hunter is that his family was massacred by Comanches and that Ethan found him as a baby. Later—the episode of Martin's mother's scalp—we realise that Scar was the perpetrator of that massacre, too.) This plot has mythical overtones: see Otto Rank's *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero*,<sup>3</sup> where—in the myths Rank analyses—the future hero is typically abandoned at birth, then rescued and taken into another family in which he grows to manhood. He is abandoned, usually, because of a prophecy that he will grow up to kill or in some other way supplant the existing tyrant patriarch/king. This motivation can be related to the two films: in *Orphans*, Louise is abandoned because her birth threatens the strict demarcations of class, which in class terms is the equivalent of replacing the tyrant-patriarch. In *The Searchers*, if we can take it that, in killing Martin's family, Scar is the equivalent of the tyrant-king, Martin is the figure who is destined to replace Scar and take over the territory. The parallel is stronger here in that

Martin grows up to kill Scar. In their outcomes, both films affirm the inevitability of history: in France after the revolution, cross-class marriages could occur; in the Indian wars after the Civil War, the whites did indeed take over the territory. In *The Searchers*, the oppressed group is destined to remain oppressed.

The main plot is then concerned with the search for a kidnapped girl (Louise; Debbie), by her adopted sister/brother (Henriette; Martin). Another figure, related by blood—the one who gave her the marker to enable her to be identified later (in Debbie's case, Ethan's military medal)—is also searching for the girl, but without the concern for the girl of the adopted sibling. The Countess does not seem to have made any real attempts to find Louise over the years; for most of the search, Ethan's motive in looking for Debbie (Lana Wood/Natalie Wood) is to kill her. The valuing of the feelings of the adopted sibling at the expense of those of the blood-related parent/parent-figure recalls similar situations in 19th century fiction, where fear of the repressive or indifferent parent/guardian is so widespread. Nicholas bringing Smike 'home' in Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby* and Marian's concern for her half-sister Laura in Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* are good examples.

That the kidnapped girl is again Louise in *Orphans* relates to her overall structural position as the 'lost child,' a particularly familiar figure of 19th century melodrama. In keeping with the expectations of such a story, *The Searchers* switches to a figure who is similarly helpless to Louise (Debbie is only a child when kidnapped). But Debbie's fate—abducted by Scar after he and his Comanches have massacred her family—echoes Martin's when he was a baby. (The more complex links—the relationship between the two men [Ethan and Scar] who 'rescue' the child from the massacre—I will discuss later.) In other words, that *The Searchers* switches to a different victim for the 'kidnap stage' is prepared for in the links between the kidnap victim and the earlier one, who now becomes the searching figure. Equally, Henriette, the searching figure in *Orphans*, had almost shared Louise's fate when she was a baby. Each film thus links the kidnapped sister and the searching adopted sister/brother in a similarly complex way.

Moreover, the searching sibling has—however marginal—links with the world into which the kidnapped girl is taken: Henriette's family came originally from the slums of Paris; Martin's eighth-Cherokee blood is heavily stressed. Whereas, for the kidnapped girl herself, it is a totally alien world, the world of the film's oppressed group. Inasmuch as the thrust of each film is to rescue her from this group, which is thereby discredited, the film sustains a reactionary perspective. But the issue is rather more complicated than this. Griffith is certainly sympathetic to the plight of the 'starving masses,' and La Frochard and Jacques should not be taken as typical. Equally, all the Indians' depredations in *The Searchers* can be traced back to one war chief, Scar. In addition, when Ethan and Martin finally find Debbie, she has become fully integrated into Comanche society, albeit into a position of subservience.

The climax of each film is the re-meeting or, more pre-



From *Orphans of the Storm*, Louise (Dorothy Gish) held captive by the Frochards. From left to right Pierre (Frank Puglia), La Frochard (Lucille La Verne), Jacques (Sheldon Lewis).

cisely, what Frank Rahill<sup>4</sup> calls the *reconnaissance*: the moment when long-lost relatives recognize one another. In *The Searchers*, this scene—just as powerful as its predecessor—is set in the desert: after five years searching, Ethan and Martin have finally found a girl they believe to be Debbie and, turning up suddenly at their camp, she dramatically confirms this. But the promised reunion is frustrated, and the relatives are torn apart again. The Indians who suddenly attack and drive Ethan and Martin away echo the soldiers who suddenly enter Henriette's room and arrest her, but at the same time, Ethan, seeking to shoot Debbie, is similar to the Count, ordering the arrest of Henriette. Both figures are acting according to repressive dictates, on which they will soften in order to permit a happy ending. And in both cases these relate to sexual relationships between the film's two groups: the Count 'forbids' a marriage between a commoner and an aristocrat; Ethan cannot bear the thought

of one between a white woman and an Indian. (Ethan does not, of course, soften on this point, but, after he's scalped Scar, he no longer wishes to kill Debbie.)

At the end of each film, the kidnapped girl is brought back amongst her 'own people' and taken into a family. But, even though in *Orphans* the family includes her own mother, in each film the family is strange to her. Here the changes from Alan Le May's novel of *The Searchers* bring the film much closer to *Orphans*. In the novel, Laurie, tired of waiting, marries Charlie and the story ends with Martin and Debbie alone together in the wilderness and her affirmation of love for him. But in the film, Martin will marry Laurie

2. See my comments on the 'divided world' of melodrama in my discussion of *Kings Row* in *Cineaction* 26/27, Winter 1992, p 88.

3. Otto Rank: *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (Vintage Books, 1964).

4. Frank Rahill: *The World of Melodrama* (Pennsylvania State UP, 1967), pp 32 & 34.

(Vera Miles) and Debbie is taken into Laurie's family, the Jorgensens. As in *Orphans*, the impending marriage between the searching figure and a member of the 'new' family provides a bridge into the family for the kidnapped girl.

Returning to the narrative structure of *Orphans*, it can be seen to have a very specific pattern, in which the initial 'traumatic event' (the killing of the father; the abandoning of Louise) is echoed (the death of Henriette's parents; the blinding of Louise) and re-echoed (the abducting of mother-figure Henriette; the abandoning of Louise) and re-echoed again (the swooning of the Countess and the arrest of Henriette; the abandoning of Louise) until a new family can be constituted which 'heals' the initial traumatic event. It achieves this not just by providing Louise with a new family, but also by the promise of a union across class boundaries, the transgression of which initiated the chain of events. Louise suffers repeatedly here because she bears the burden of being the child of the initial cross-class union. But the film betrays its ideological position in denying her the final healing function, and in shifting this to Henriette. Nevertheless, the new parent-figures (a) replace, and repay by an equivalent adoption, Henriette's own and (b) provide a home for the 'orphans.' (The shift in rank is a common feature of the myths Rank discusses. He analyses this as dramatising, as narrative, Freud's 'family romance': childhood fantasies which disown one's own parents by imagining that one is really the child of noble parentage: "the two parent couples of the myth correspond to the real and the imaginary parent couple of the romantic fantasy," p 72.)

What we would seem to have here is a very particular form of narrative, in which a past traumatic event relating to the violation of a family is compulsively re-enacted in the body of the text: a *narrative return* of the repressed. The film's climaxes and reversals—the essence of its melodramatic narrative—are actually determined by this 'initial traumatic event.' (I prefer this term to Freud's 'primal scene,' since he was talking about a very specific childhood experience. The initial traumatic event, as will be seen, can encompass a range of different experiences.) The event in *Orphans* concerns a murder motivated by class hatred and the tearing apart of a mother and child. It is the latter—the violation of one of the sacrosanct relationships of melodrama—which echoes most strongly through the narrative. But the former is nevertheless registered in the way that, in two of the three cases, it is aristocratic villainy which severs Louise from her mother-figure(s).

Of course, virtually all narrative—certainly narrative in mainstream cinema—is set in motion by an initiating event which (on Todorov's model<sup>5</sup>) disrupts a pre-existent equilibrium. Moreover, in the subsequent development of the narrative, repetition and variation are crucial structuring principles, working the narrative through to the point where a final restoration of equilibrium can occur. Equally, the final scene in many films will in some sense echo the opening one. I will call this 'traditional narrative.' But the narrative pattern I have pointed to in *Orphans* seems to me different: the echoes of the 'initial traumatic event' would seem to be for the most part unconscious, or at least compulsive, like a narrative version of Freud's 'repetition-com-

pulsion.' This gives them an intensity which is characteristic of the melodramatic mode, with its depiction of extremes of emotion and 'excessive' situations. What we have here, I would argue, is an example of melodramatic narrative.

The distinction between the two types of narrative may be illustrated by reference back to my article on *The Big Sleep*.<sup>6</sup> The conscious paralleling that Hawks introduces throughout the film (the paired scenes) is an example of traditional narrative. But, at the end of the article, I mention that the film also has another narrative pattern, "which can be seen as a series of echoes of the pre-narrative 'traumatic event': the killing of Regan. (The echoes follow a desire-murder-blackmail pattern which is repeated throughout the movie.)" I do not discuss this further but, I would argue, this narrative pattern, like that in *Orphans*, is different in kind from the conscious patterning that I do discuss. And that the initial traumatic event in this film is a murder prompted by the frustration of desire (this applies whether Carmen or Mars killed Regan) shows that the event can assume different forms in different genres.

In *Orphans*, the series of echoes of the initial traumatic event mentioned above constitute the dominant group. But in almost all the climactic scenes which relate to the personal—as opposed to the political—story there are traces of the event. The two fights with swords/knives echo the opening sword fight between De Vaudrey and Louise's father. (Ideologically, they reverse its meaning, since De Vaudrey was killing a man who had a 'legitimate' sexual claim on a woman. But the basic ingredients of the scenes—a duel over a woman's 'honour,' with the woman, terrified, also present—are essentially the same.) Similarly, the two incursions into Henriette's room by armed men echo the incursion by De Vaudrey into his daughter's bedroom to kill her husband and make off with her child. Indeed, this echo is very clear in the first example—when the Count bursts in to arrest Henriette—since the Countess is also present and she is just about to be reunited with her lost daughter. No wonder she faints: her husband is like a resurrection of her father, once more taking her child from her. The second example—Jacques Forget-Not arresting Henriette and the Chevalier—relates to the film's insistence on the mirroring tyrannies before and during the revolution. Here the aristocrat is the figure who, because of his class, is condemned to death.

What does this narrative pattern suggest about *The Searchers*? First, it underlines the melodramatic structure of the film's narrative: within the western setting is a highly melodramatic plot concerning sexual violation, abandoned/abducted children, the seeking of revenge, the search to bring someone 'home,' etc. (At the climactic moment, when Ethan takes Debbie in his arms and does not kill her, he actually delivers that most familiar of all closing lines in Hollywood melodrama: "Let's go home.") Second, it points to the massacre of Martin's family and his being abandoned as a baby as the equivalent initial traumatic event. Again, this relates to a violation of the family—the rape and murder of Martin's mother in place of the murder of Louise's father—and again it may be seen as a crucial precursor to the repeated violations of the family within the

main body of the narrative. However, in this instance the pre-narrative traumatic event is overshadowed by the far more—because dramatised—massacre *within* the film: the killing of Aaron Edwards (Walter Coy), his wife Martha (Dorothy Jordan) and their son, Ben and the taking of the two daughters into captivity. (Lucy/Pippa Scott is raped and murdered in the initial stages of the search; Debbie remains in captivity.) This is the scene which, like the opening of *Orphans*, produces a trauma which needs to be 'healed,' and which generates echoes within the narrative. And so, although the 'pre-narrative,' traumatic event may be seen, as in *Orphans*, as the initiator of the melodramatic chain of narrative, it is the scene which first echoes it in the body of the text which is paramount to the narrative's subsequent development. Furthermore, as critics have pointed out, Scar's massacre of the family may be seen as arising out of the tensions in an earlier scene: Ethan's return home. In other words, *The Searchers* possesses a much more complex configuration of events which determine the form and substance of the melodramatic narrative. In effect, the 'initial traumatic event' is a combination of three events: the massacre of Martin's family (and abandoning of the child), Ethan's return home, and the massacre of the Edwards family (and kidnapping of Debbie).

The tensions Ethan introduces into his brother Aaron's home relate to a number of factors: his apparently criminal recent past (the newly-minted gold pieces); his hostility to Martin ("fellow could mistake you for a half-breed"); his suppressed love for Martha, his sister-in-law. These tensions are then transformed into the physical violence of Scar's attack, which is clearly connected to Ethan's return. The film emphasises the connection between the events in several ways, e.g., the way Ethan 'knows' what is going to happen; the way Ford cuts to the house just before the attack from a shot of Ethan looking back across the desert, as if he is imagining the scene; the way the dog barks at the Indians lurking out of sight exactly as it did when Ethan first rode up. But the most remarkable connection would seem to be unconscious. After Ethan, on the porch, has watched Aaron follow Martha into the bedroom, Ford dissolves to an exterior shot of the ranch the next day. Black smoke issuing from the chimney almost makes the house seem to be on fire. Only minutes later, when the men ride off to look for the cattle, there is no smoke. Perhaps, here, we have a rationale for the film's extraordinary series of continuity errors—which begin with the third shot, with the miraculous appearance of an Indian blanket on a rail bare in the first shot—as an expression of the film's unconscious. When Ethan rides over the hill and sees the ranch burning in front of him, it is as if he is being confronted with the consequences of his own darkest desires. Scar is indeed the return of the repressed, and just as his rape of Martha and massacre of the family represent the drives of Ethan's Id, so his kidnapping of Debbie (and, at first, Lucy) plays upon Ethan's greatest fear: miscegenation.

The kidnapped child plot serves a very different purpose here, expressing the fears of those on the fringes of white civilization that the forces of savagery will descend and not just kill them, but rape the women and carry off the chil-

dren. (Is there also a contemporary fear: that a runaway child might actually come to accept a 'non-civilized' lifestyle, an anticipation of the drop-out generation?) From this point of view, the 'happy ending' is achieved all too simply: the offenders are simply killed. But the movie is made complex—and in a way quite foreign to *Orphans*—by the linking of the destructive forces to the hero.

The extent to which the film's opening scenes echo through the narrative may be seen by looking at a couple of examples. The second attack that Ethan 'knows' is going to take place is that of Futterman (Peter Mamakos) and his men. Again it is preceded by an interior scene in which elements of the scene of Ethan's return home—his newly-minted gold pieces; Debbie's child's dress—make an appearance. Futterman's haggling over money recalls Ethan's touchy conviction, in the earlier scene, that Aaron wanted money from him. Then, at Martin and Ethan's camp, Ethan uses fire to stake Martin out as bait for the anticipated raiders; twice Martin complains that he's "burning up." When Futterman does attack, he shoots first at the shape he takes to be Ethan, enabling Ethan, hiding elsewhere, to kill him. But Ethan couldn't possibly know that Futterman wouldn't shoot first at Martin. On the one hand, Ethan's actions here suggest he is compulsively recreating elements of the massacre (a dangerously exposed family member; fire) in order to enact his own ruthless revenge on the raiders: he shoots all three in the back. (Futterman is also tainted—in both Ethan's eyes and western demonology—by being an Indian trader.) On the other hand, Ethan's actions betray his hostility towards Martin: it is as if he is re-staging these elements so that Martin, absent from the scene of the massacre, could now be killed.

Later in the search, there is a more explicit echo of the massacre of the Edwards' family: the massacre of the Indian village. This scene is preceded by (1) Ethan's demented shooting at the buffalo and (2) the introduction of the cavalry, the actual perpetrators of the massacre. It's as if Ethan's wish to kill Indians by starving them—his excuse for shooting the buffalo—is translated through the cavalry into an actual massacre. nevertheless, in this scene Ford begins to construct an equivalent to the mirroring tyrannies of *Orphans*, emphasising that the whites were just as capable of ruthless killing as the Indians. Unfortunately—it is a serious flaw in the movie—this progressive position is not carried through. That one of the victims of the cavalry massacre was Look (Beulah Archuleta), Martin's inadvertently-acquired Indian wife, is not presented as traumatic in the way, say, the discovery of Lucy's body was. Whereas Ethan's discovery of Lucy's body provokes Brad Jorgensen (Harry Carey Jr) to a suicidal one-man attack on the Comanche camp, and is one of the key events that fuels Ethan's seeking of vengeance on the Indians, his and Martin's discovery of Look's body merits little more than a complaint that the killing was unnecessary. Indeed, in that

5. See Edward Branigan: *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (Routledge, 1992) for a discussion of Todorov (pp 4–6) as well as many other theories of narrative.

6. Michael Walker: Hawks and Film Noir: *The Big Sleep* (*Cineaction* 13/14, Summer 1988.)

From *The Searchers*, Scar's tent: Debbie (Natalie Wood) displays the scalps to Ethan (John Wayne) and Martin (Jeffrey Hunter). Scar (Henry Brandon) and Figueroa (Antonio Moreno) in the foreground.



the death frees Martin from any further obligation to her, it is ultimately something of a relief.

As in *Orphans*, the scene which echoes the initial traumatic event(s) most profoundly is the *reconnaissance*. Immediately before it, Ethan meets Scar for the first time. As critics have observed, Ford visualises the confrontation (aggressively, Ethan stands chest to chest in front of Scar) as like a mirror reflection: Ethan has come face to face with his Id-figure. The tensions that Ethan introduced into his brother's home are then echoed in the scene that follows in Scar's 'home.' This scene is short, but extremely compressed. In it, Ethan asks (of the four women in a corner of the tent): "Are all those his wives?" Scar: "Two sons killed by white men. For each son I take many..." (pause). Figueroa (Antonio Moreno): "Scalps." The word we are expecting here is wives. On one reading, the film could be substituting scalps euphemistically for wives—and, in context, referring to white wives. On another, Scar could be saying: I don't just take wives, I kill. But lying behind this second reading is the association of killing with raping. When, on Scar's orders, one of the wives comes over and displays a series of scalps to Ethan and Martin, there seem to be women's scalps amongst them. (Later Ethan will tell Martin that one of these was his mother's.) The men turn to look at the young woman and react simultaneously: they recognise her as Debbie. As if to confirm this, Scar displays the medal Ethan gave Debbie: it is this that drives Ethan out of the tent.

The scene builds dramatically on the tensions Ethan introduced into his brother's home. His paranoid fantasy that Martin could be mistaken for a "half-breed" has become the paranoid reality of Debbie being mistaken for an Indian: her dress, behaviour and (in the next scene) her language. Ethan's barely suppressed hostility towards Martin (the son he would have liked to have had?) is transformed into his murderous hostility towards Debbie (the daughter who might have been his own). His rather casual distribution of his 'mementoes' of war amongst his brother's children (his sword to Ben; his

medal to Debbie; his greatcoat, posthumously, to Lucy) is here answered by Scar's macho display of his own war trophies: the scalps. And, amongst his trophies is one of Ethan's. Finally, Debbie as Scar's wife echoes, in racial terms, Martha as Aaron's; Ethan's subsequent attempt to kill Debbie thus reflects back on his unconscious responsibility for Martha's murder.

These tensions are carried over into the next scene. Camped in the desert outside Scar's camp, again Ethan 'knows' that Scar will attack. But the Comanche attack is preceded by the great sequence of the *reconnaissance*: Debbie and Martin's re-meeting when she confirms who she is: "I remember—from always." It's at this point that Ethan draws his gun to shoot her, and Martin stands in front of her to protect her. The Comanche attack that erupts to break the confrontation echoes the Comanche attack on the Edwards' house: Debbie is reclaimed by the Indians; Ethan is wounded. But, whereas the first attack, arising out of the drives of Ethan's unconscious, was lethal; this attack, as if summoned up by the young people to protect themselves from Ethan, is soon evaded. Martin and Ethan make a getaway, and are able to hold off the Comanche pursuit.

The arrival of the revolution at this point in *Orphans* guarantees that there is still plenty of drama to come. Whereas *The Searchers*—with one of two obvious exceptions—becomes much less effective in its last half hour. Although Ethan's return to the Jorgensens is once again darkened by reference to his criminal past (the shooting of Futterman and company) and followed by news of Scar's return to the area, neither of these generates much tension. Martin's fight with Charlie (Ken Curtis) over Laurie intriguingly evokes the two parallelled 'duels' in *Orphans*, but the fight is basically treated as comedy, with Laurie, very unlike her predecessors, a delighted onlooker. The Lieut. Greenhill episode is but an embarrassing indulgence of Wayne Jr by his father and friends. And the Rangers' attack on the Indian village is so clumsily handled that one suspects that Ford was deeply uneasy about it, and

attempted to lighten the tone to make the attack seem less offensive. But it still contrasts sharply with the earlier massacre of an Indian village, where we sympathise with the victims at the expense of the military.

The Rangers' attack is nevertheless structurally the equivalent of Danton's ride to the rescue in *Orphans*, which underlines the way in which the figure of the dominant hero has become corrupted in *The Searchers*. Just as Martin is the later film's equivalent of the Chevalier—the young hero who will marry the young heroine—so Ethan should have been the equivalent of Danton, the powerful hero who presides over the happy ending of the other characters, but who cannot—because his destiny lies elsewhere—share in that happy ending himself. (In *Orphans*, although Griffith cannot bear to refer to it, Danton is indeed dead before the end of the film, since the ending occurs after Robespierre's death.) But, in place of the traditional ride to the rescue, *The Searchers* substitutes Ethan's demented seeking of revenge. The climactic moment of the Rangers' attack is Ethan's scalping of Scar, and Ford emphasises the macho aggressiveness of this not only by Ethan riding his horse into Scar's tent but by a remarkable shot, inside the tent, of the breast of the horse thrusting across the image. Having scalped Scar, Ethan then rides after Debbie—who is fleeing on foot—in a similarly demented manner, casting aside Martin, who is desperately trying to stop him. Although Ethan's histrionic gesture of raising Debbie in his arms (instead of killing her) not only echoes his gesture in the film's opening scene, but also recalls that of Danton lifting Henriette in his arms on the scaffold, we cannot ignore the irony: the only person Ethan has saved Debbie from is himself.

That Ethan nevertheless shares important similarities with no less than three of the characters in *Orphans* (Danton, the Count and the Countess) illustrates the complexity of his character. In Robert Heilman's terms,<sup>7</sup> he is a tragic character, divided between the imperative to save Debbie and the impulse to kill her. He is redeemed at the end by a purging of his destructive impulses, but at the expense of exiling himself from the community. In scalping Scar, Ethan carries out the same ritual mutilation that Scar himself performed on Martha and on Martin's mother. And so, symbolically, he joins with the Indian, wandering forever between the winds.

For Debbie to be a precise counterpart of Louise, she would need to bear an equivalent burden of 'guilt': to be, in fact, the daughter of Ethan and Martha (or, even better, the daughter of Scar and Martha, but the film could not possibly go this far). But, the image of Martha and Debbie watching Ethan ride away notwithstanding, there is no real supporting evidence for this. In fact, in contrast to *Orphans*, the film shows nothing of Debbie suffering whilst kidnapped. Instead, we hear white fantasies of what her fate has been, notably Laurie's hysterical "the leavings of Comanche bucks, sold time and again to the highest bidder." Debbie's fate is a symbol of *their* fears; fears which can only find release in murder. At the end of her extraordinary outburst, Laurie says that if Ethan gets a chance, "he'll put a bullet in her brain—and I tell you Martha would want him to."

In the novel, Laurie's outburst in effect serves to drive Martin away; the next he hears is that she's married Charlie.

In the film, it is astonishing because it is so utterly unrecuperated. Structurally, the projected marriage between Martin and Laurie is nevertheless highly significant: like the projected marriage of Henriette and the Chevalier, it can be seen to resolve the tensions of the initial traumatic event in the next generation. This is because the marriage of Laurie and Charlie would potentially have set up the same sort of tensions as existed in the Ethan-Martha-Aaron triangle: the woman marrying the husband-figure (Aaron; Charlie), but loving the adventurer-hero (Ethan; Martin). Although, on the surface, the interruption of Laurie and Charlie's wedding repeats the pattern of Ethan's entry into the community generating tensions, its deeper function—through Martin—is to break the pattern. This is then confirmed in the crucial shift to Martin as the dominant hero: it is he who kills Scar and thereby rescues Debbie.

*Orphans* suggests a final healing of the wounds of the initial trauma by permitting what was initially condemned: the cross-class marriage. Here, society has changed. (Although, to judge from the sumptuous garden in which Griffith gathers together his new family group, not by much.) *The Searchers* suggests such a healing by the opposite route: preventing a repetition of the initial circumstances. Society, here, has not changed. And for the ending to resolve all the tensions would require that the racial fears were set at rest. This is only partly achieved by the removal of the external threat (Scar and his village); it also relates to attitudes to Debbie. This raises problems which the film cannot handle. Ethan's last-minute change of heart about Debbie is clearly not enough: what about Laurie's racist outburst, delivered with an extraordinary vehemence? The film simply forgets the problem, just as it draws a veil over the trauma for Debbie of reintegration into white society.

In saving Martin as a baby, Ethan became, symbolically, his father. And yet, maddeningly, the film suggests more. In the novel, the equivalent figure to Ethan is called Amos; Ethan was the name of Martin's actual father. And the two dissolves from Ethan to Martin which frame Martin's first scene in the film are very precise. We attribute Ethan's hostility to Martin to his racism, but it would equally make sense as his being confronted with a grown-up son he had done his best to forget. (Amos shows no such hostility towards Martin in the novel.) And the business of Martin's mother's scalp is handled so bizarrely in the film, as if it was a secret that Ethan didn't want to talk about. (In the novel, there is a scene in which Amos and Martin stop at the site of the Pauley ranch and Amos talks to Martin about his dead family. He mentions how strikingly beautiful Martin's mother's hair was. His subsequent recognition of her scalp is thus prepared for, and it isn't something he keeps secret; he tells Martin about it immediately after the scene in Scar's tent.) It's as if the film were suggesting that the massacre that we see is, for Ethan, a re-enactment of an earlier massacre in which a woman he cared about? carried a guilty secret about? was raped and murdered. Whilst all this is hypothetical, it does promote the pre-narrative traumatic event to a position of far greater significance.

7. Robert B. Heilman: *The Iceman, The Arsonist and the Troubled Agent* (University of Washington Press, 1973), chapter 2.

cance in determining the course of the events within the narrative.

The melodramatic narrative that I outlined for *Orphans*—the echoing and re-echoing of the initial traumatic event—is present in *The Searchers*, but not as strongly. However, again it would seem that the melodramatic thrust of the film is underpinned by a narrative pattern which derives from a crucial series of events, concerning violations against the family, which occur at the beginning of the narrative. But the links between the films are not simply determined by this narrative pattern. Certain character links—notably the way in which Ethan is like a combination of characters in *Orphans*—would suggest that we need to look further to account for all the similarities. This, I suspect, would require an exploration similar to Levi-Strauss' structural analysis of myths,<sup>8</sup> treating the two films as like myths, telling and re-telling a story which relates to basic fears and ideological contradictions within the society. It seems interesting in this respect that each film has a figure who mediates between the film's two groups: Pierre in *Orphans*; Mose Harper (Hank Worden) in *The Searchers*. Just as Pierre saves Louise, so Mose twice finds Debbie for Ethan and Martin. And each is rewarded, at the end, with a place within the family, albeit in a subservient position. (That the penultimate scene of each film ends with a stupid joke about a sword being poked up someone's bum is a rather more bizarre connection.)

For the purposes of this article, however, I would like to concentrate on the thesis that an initial traumatic event can serve to generate a certain sort of narrative. This may be explored further by looking at a group of films in which children are 'traumatised' by the eruption in the present of long-suppressed parental conflicts: Walsh's *Pursued* (1947), Kazan's *East of Eden* (1955) and Minnelli's *Home From the Hill* (1960). As melodramas, the films may be related in a number of ways. First, the 'traumas' would seem to be connected with revelations of parent sexuality: adultery by one parent is a crucial ingredient. Second, each of the films dramatises the trauma through the use of two 'brothers': their relationship with each other and with a young woman who is in some sense between them. Third, there are Cain and Abel overtones explicitly in *East of Eden* and implicitly in *Pursued*.

In *Pursued* there is, again, an initial traumatic event (the killing of Jeb's family) which results in a child being orphaned and subsequently raised in another family. And here the love between the adopted son Jeb (Robert Mitchum) and the daughter of the family Thor (Teresa Wright) is allowed to develop, although against fierce opposition from the incestuously possessive Adam (John Rodney), Thor's brother. The traumatic event, in this film, echoes within the body of the text in two quite distinct ways. On the one hand, Jeb is repeatedly haunted by vague memories of the event, and in this sense the film is like a psychological melodrama, such as Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945), in which the hero experiences the traumatic return of repressed memories under certain specific triggering conditions.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, like *Orphans*, the film also has a very strong pattern of echoes within the narrative of a crucial feature of the initial traumatic event: here, death as punishment for illicit sexuality. Jeb's father was killed in a blood feud provoked by his affair with Thor's

mother, Ma (Judith Anderson)—a feud which also caused the deaths of Thor's father and the rest of Jeb's family—and the instigator of the feud, Grant (Dean Jagger), swears vengeance on Jeb as the only remaining member of the family. Thor's love affair with Jeb re-enacts the 'illicit love affair' in the next generation, and the film is full of scenes in which Jeb, in his pursuit of Thor, is threatened with death, culminating in the killers appearing outside his ranch on his wedding night. Here Grant is like Ethan, seeking revenge on the man who killed his brother and 'violated' his brother's wife. In their pursuit of vengeance, both men become pathological, not only murderously pursuing the initial offender (Jeb's father; Scar) but seeking also to kill innocents who are held to be contaminated by their relationship to the initial offender (Jeb; Debbie). The link emphasises how like a villain Ethan becomes: Grant is one of the nastiest villains in western history.

*Pursued* is even more of a mix of genres than *The Searchers*: a western which includes strong elements of *film noir*, psychological melodrama and family melodrama. But, as with *The Searchers*, it is melodrama—here in two separate strands—which accounts for the primary thrust of the narrative. The two strands finally merge when Jeb, back at the site of the initial traumatic event, is surrounded, as in the past, by the killers seeking revenge. This re-enactment of the past trauma causes Jeb to remember not only the event but its cause: the parental adultery. The realisation leads him to surrender to the death drive, and he gives himself up to Grant. It is Ma who saves him, shooting Grant herself, and so freeing Jeb and Thor for a happy ending: "Take your wife home, Jeb."

In *East of Eden*, the initial traumatic event is Kate's shooting Adam and deserting him and their two boys, Cal and Aron. This happened immediately after the boys were born, but Adam has told them that their mother is dead. The film begins in 1917, with Cal (James Dean)'s discovery that not only is Kate (Jo Van Fleet) still alive, but that she's the madame of a brothel. Misunderstood by Adam (Raymond Massey), Cal identifies with Kate, seeing himself as "bad" in the same sort of way that she is. Aron (Richard Davalos) is Adam's favourite, the "good" son. But Abra (Julie Harris), Aron's girl, becomes bored with Aron's chaste love-making and hungers for the more physical Cal. This unspoken rivalry between the brothers over both their father and Abra culminates in a climactic sequence on Adam's birthday which tears the family apart. Seeking to win his father's love, Cal has made money growing beans, and he gives Adam the profits. Aron's birthday present to his father is the announcement that he and Abra are engaged. In his delight at Aron's gift and flat rejection of Cal's—he accuses him of profiteering from America's entry into the war—Adam deeply hurts Cal, who then seeks revenge on Aron by taking him to see Kate. This, in turn, devastates Aron, who gets drunk and joins a troop train leaving for the war. The sight of Aron, drunk, leaving on the train, gives Adam a stroke.

Again, the initial traumatic event (as experienced by Adam) reverberates through these events: Adam's savage emotional rejection of Cal; Aron's horror at Kate's sexuality; Adam's shock at the sight of the brutally transformed Aron. Aron's head shattering the glass of the train window is the equivalent of the bullet entering Adam's body: he collapses at

that moment. (This is a brilliant condensation of the events in Steinbeck's novel, in which Adam has a minor stroke when he hears that Aron has enlisted, but does not suffer the major attack until he hears that Aron has been killed at the front.) The repressed, here, is not only Kate's sexuality, but 'the truth' about human drives and needs, which are too complex for the high-minded morality of Adam and Aron. They are the figures who are genuinely traumatised by the 'return of the repressed,' who surrender, in effect, to the death drive.

In the novel, the tensions between Cal and Aron are a conscious re-working of the tensions in the earlier generation between Adam and his brother Charles. The film suppresses this—there is no mention whatever of Charles—and instead focuses, melodramatically, on the eruption into the present of the repressed material connected with Kate. And so, Steinbeck's structured 'working through' of repeated incidents and motifs is replaced, in the film, by a steady movement towards a highly condensed Kazan climax, in which, again, elements of the initial traumatic event seem to be compulsively re-enacted. Not only is the scene in the railway station not in the novel, but Steinbeck does not even depict Aron meeting Kate. Both, in the film, are classic melodramatic confrontations. This illustrates, again, the distinction I wish to make between traditional narrative (as in the novel) and melodramatic narrative (as in the film). In effect, Paul Osborn's script and Kazan's direction turn a long, discursive, detailed, classically-constructed novel into a 50s Hollywood melodrama.

On the pattern established by these two films, we would have expected the past traumatic event in *Home From the Hill* to have been the marital rupture between Hannah (Eleanor Parker) and Wade (Robert Mitchum), occasioned by her discovery of Wade's illegitimate son, Rafe, and his mother already waiting in the house when she and Wade return from their honeymoon. Hannah's response was to 'lock her door' on Wade, which caused Wade to become a notorious womaniser within the town. Hannah tells their son Theron (George Hamilton) this story in order to account for the hostile way Theron has been treated by Halstead (Everett Sloane), the father of Libby (Luana Patten), Theron's girlfriend. But it is not this part of the story which shocks Theron, but his father's treatment of Rafe, exiled to a cabin in the woods. It is on Rafe (George Peppard)'s account that Theron confronts Wade and, when the latter—the wealthiest landowner in town, and hence the film's main patriarchal figure—continues to refuse to acknowledge Rafe publicly, Theron disinherits himself and leaves home. He goes to join Rafe in the wilderness. This relocates the initial traumatic event as the casting out of Rafe, confirmed in Rafe's story to Theron of the sense of exclusion and jealousy he felt towards Theron during the years they were both growing up. This event, too, can be seen to echo through the narrative: Hannah's locked door 'casting out' Wade; Halstead's door shutting out Theron; Theron joining Rafe in the latter's cabin; and, finally, Theron going into self-imposed exile. In effect, this final act completes the initial casting out, but with Theron in place of Rafe. Here the potential Cain and Abel jealousies and hatreds are dissolved: the sons are not in conflict, it is the father who is indicted.

As in *Pursued* and the novel of *East of Eden*, the past ten-

sions and transgressions are echoed in the next generation: Theron, like his father before him, impregnates a girl of the town and then 'deserts' her. And here it is Rafe who acts as the healing figure, marrying Libby to provide a father for the child and, after the death of Wade, incorporating Hannah as grandmother into the new family. *Home From the Hill*, too, ends with the "let's go home" line, delivered by Rafe to Hannah. But, as in Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, the links and re-workings at this level are very consciously developed within the film. Although the series of echoes mentioned above constitute one melodramatic thread in the film, it is by no means the most significant one. Much more powerful is the way in which the clash of ideologies enacted upon Theron (his mother's wish that he be a gentleman; his father's that he be a hunter) sets off a chain reaction that leads to a bloody climax in which Halstead shoots and kills Wade, and Theron then hunts down and shoots and kills Halstead. This is a much more conscious working through of events, in which all the participants are shown to be blindly acting out the tensions and contradictions in the ideology.

In other words, the narrative pattern that I have been discussing in this essay is not the only example of melodramatic narrative. What *Home From the Hill* possesses is a very complex analysis—through the investigation of competing ideological positions—of the whole society which it depicts. And one of the mechanisms it uses is a 'melodramatic chain of events,' an escalating cause-effect chain to which all the characters are shown to contribute and during the course of which all—save perhaps Rafe—are criticised. We have moved a long way, here, from the compulsive narrative re-enactments of *Orphans*.

The narrative pattern deriving from an initial traumatic event is present strongly in some films—e.g., *Orphans of the Storm*—but only weakly in others—e.g., *Home From the Hill*. In *Pursued* it is complicated by the two distinct melodramatic strands which derive from the event; in *The Searchers* it is complicated by the complexity of the initiating events. And in *East of Eden* the traumatic event does not really give rise to a narrative pattern: the echoes are for the most part condensed into one evening. Nevertheless, the concept, as I have outlined it, provides a useful tool for narrative analysis of certain sorts of film, and the example of *The Big Sleep* shows that it is not merely confined to films which fall within the province of 'family melodrama.' How widespread its application will turn out to be remains to be seen, but I suspect that most films in which there is a violent or traumatic event which precedes the narrative will in some sense register this event within the narrative. I also suspect that, as in the films discussed, the registering will be essentially unconscious or compulsive, a further validation of a psychoanalytical approach to analysing popular film.

My colleague, Leighton Grist, again made useful suggestions during the drafting of this essay, and I would like to acknowledge his contributions, particularly in connection with the novel and film of *East of Eden*.

8. Claude Levi-Strauss: *Structural Anthropology* (Penguin, 1963), chapter XI.

9. Andrew Britton's excellent article in *Framework* 4, Summer 1976, discusses this aspect of *Pursued*.

# Male Narrative/ Female Narration

ELAINE MAY'S MIKEY AND NICKY

Although the decision to write about Elaine May's *Mikey and Nicky* was initially made because of a desire to discuss a film which had long been among my favourites, it rapidly became clear that any serious analysis of this complex work would need to take into account its interaction with a number of contemporary critical concerns: the possibility for a female discourse within, and a critique of, both a masculine dominated industry and a masculine genre; the value of the 'realist' text as a forum for the progressive exploration of societal structures; the crisis in gender roles and the realisation that these roles are not only constructed but are mutually exclusive.

Clearly these ideas are intricately connected, providing the basis for a nexus of related theoretical approaches. The nature of the film's relationship to this nexus can best be defined by considering its status as part of the 70s cycle of 'buddy' movies. Predecessors of the cycle can be traced all the way back to the silent era (there are several examples in Hawks) but the group of films with which I am concerned was inaugurated by *Easy Rider* (1969) and essentially ended (though remnants continued to be produced through the 80s) with *The Deer Hunter* (1978) (I am obviously defining the cycle fairly loosely and including a number of films which deal with male relationships while not being 'buddy' films proper; nevertheless all of these works do seem to belong to the same general movement.)

If one sees this cycle as in some way a response to the combined influence of the feminist and gay movements, then an evaluation of any of the films within it must be made on the basis of its treatment of women and homosexuality. In fact the demands of feminism proved to be relatively easy to satisfy, partly because they were so much easier to assimilate on the superficial level (look, for instance, at *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*'s trendy portrayal of an emancipated woman), partly because it was easier to assent to the proposition that women had as much right to liberty as men than it was to acknowledge that the male 'buddies' might have sexual feelings for each other. Peter Fonda's *The Hired Hand*, in particular, manifests the most extraordinary split between the sensitivity and

by Brad Stevens

intelligence of its treatment of women and the crudity and opportunism of its treatment of gays, and, though the cycle contains many films of distinction, as well as a small number of masterpieces, none (with the exception of *Dog Day Afternoon*, which is clearly a special case) is able to state that its protagonists make love, much less show them doing so (the long sequences of bike-riding in *Easy Rider* are the nearest thing to a love-making scene in any of the films).

It seems, then, clear enough that the presence in many of these films of a minor character who is explicitly gay and is presented as either monstrous or ridiculous functions as a disclaimer of homosexuality. Certainly one can find these characters in (and the list is not exhaustive) *Midnight Cowboy*, *The Hired Hand*, *Papillon*,

*Scarecrow*, *California Split*, *Mean Streets*, *Deliverance*, *Two Lane Blacktop*, *Freebie and the Bean* and *Busting* (again there is, apparently, a predecessor in Hawks' 1926 *Fig Leaves*, which I have not seen; one should also mention Reed's *The Third Man*). There are, however, other disclaimers available, the range and ingenuity of which testify to the enormity of the threat that homosexuality is perceived (usually correctly) as posing to the films' coherence. *The Duellists*, to take one example, buries the nature of the relationship between its protagonists under layers of ambiguity; *Thunderbolt and Lightfoot*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid* and *Dog Day Afternoon*, the four films in which the homosexual element is at its clearest and most positive, adopt structures which ensure that its 'lovers' are kept separate either during significant stretches of the films' running time or throughout; most ingenious of all are David Carradine's rarely seen *You and Me*, L. Q. Jones' *A Boy and his Dog* and Peckinpah's *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* in which one of the adult male protagonists is replaced by, respectively, a young boy, a dog and a rotting human head. This last example should, however, be enough to make clear that these supposed 'disclaimers' often have a quite different function.

There are, for instance, definite distinctions to be made within the films which use explicitly gay characters, John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy*

belonging in quite a different category from Jerry

Schatzberg's *Scarecrow*. The difference is that,

while Schatzberg's vile film is obviously using its

single homosexual figure, against whom it seems

to have a particular animus, as a contrast with the

'just good pals' relationship of its central characters,

Schlesinger's portrays its two homosexuals sympathetically, using them to cast doubts on the nature of its protagonist.<sup>1</sup>

When we arrive at a masterpiece like *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* we can see that the supposed 'disclaimer' is nothing

1. It is worth noting that the subsequent careers of the authors of both films offer confirmation of this reading: Schatzberg directed a series of right-wing films, extreme even by the standards of the Reaganite 80s, which upheld the status of the Father (*Misunderstood*), expressed a crude anti-feminism (*Honeysuckle Rose*) and, in perhaps the most Fascistic film made outside of Germany, issued a direct call for race hatred (*Street Smart*); Schlesinger, on the other hand, directed *Sunday Bloody Sunday* and recently came out as gay.



Elaine May and Mike Nichols in a comedy sketch on  
*The Jack Paar Program*, 1965

of the sort, its function being rather to allow for an analysis of male relationships which is totally free of sentimentality. The film begins with a vision of female solidarity (associated with both fertility and an idyllic natural setting) being disrupted by two men who come bearing the law of the Father and who are the first of the film's progression of paired males, a progression which includes an explicitly homosexual couple and which culminates in the nightmarish car journey of the 'hero' Benny and the rotting head of Alfredo Garcia.

The car journey is Peckinpah's typically clear-sighted variation on one of the distinguishing features of the cycle. The journey structure relates to the opposition, central to American ideology, between settling and wandering (or the garden and the wilderness). The filmic genres in which the second part of this opposition could be more or less harmoniously established at the expense of the first were the western and the war film, both of which provided iron-clad alibis for the existence of the 'world without women' the necessity for which was seen in terms of the construction and defence of a 'settled' civilization. The problem facing the buddy films of the 70s was that the Vietnam war, the film's immediate historical context, was clearly not negotiable in these terms, and it should be clear that the closing down of one possible source for the harmonious resolution of the contradictions of masculine relationships between heterosexuals, together with the separate criticisms of imperialism which Vietnam encouraged and the already noted demands of the gay and feminist movements, provided the basis for a situation in which the concerns of the western became transplanted into those of the road movie, wherein the world of masculine action is stripped of its ostensible aim. Rather than resulting in a new awareness of the sexual feelings which this world is rooted in, however, the dominant tone of these films is one of desperation and disillusionment, the journey of the road movie being explicitly seen as purposeless, its goals illusory (a tone which itself fed back into the contemporary western). One can hardly fail to note the significance of the fact that the buddy cycle ends when its conventions come into conflict with those of the war film in Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (although Peckinpah's *Cross of Iron*, made the previous year, is also relevant here).

THE RELATIONSHIP OF MIKEY AND NICKY to all of this is complex, but it is of the essence of May's film that one feels that not only can it be read as a critique of the 'buddy' cycle, but that May has fully grasped the relevance of this cycle, the film being completely in control of its project.

The issues which I have so far been discussing provide the basis for a thematic reading of the film: if, however, I should choose to begin by approaching it on the formal level, this is partly because it seems to put up such a resistance to any kind of formalist reading. The usual critical reaction to the film, whether positive or negative, is to suggest that it is an undisciplined exercise in improvisation, owing more to its co-star, John Cassavetes, than to its ostensible director. This, I must admit, was my initial reaction, but it is one that I now feel was totally mistaken, for I believe that May has deliberately adopted the surface char-

acteristics of this style in order to allow her audience to react more directly. Our primary concern, in other words, is with the pro-filmic event, a concern implied by a camera style in which it seems that, in Ian Cameron's words, "it doesn't much matter where the camera is providing it catches what's going on."<sup>2</sup> The obvious source for this style is the documentary, but perhaps even more relevant, in this context, is the pornographic film.

One should, however, remember that May's two previous films were unquestionably 'well made' in the conventional sense, and that *Mikey and Nicky* not only went vastly over schedule during its production in 1973 but that May worked on the editing for three years, finally allowing it to be released in 1976. It hardly makes sense that a filmmaker of proven ability would spend such an extraordinary amount of time just to be sloppy: indeed repeated viewings of the film reveal that May's *mise-en-scène* is in fact highly sophisticated, and that the impression of stylelessness actually enables her to achieve stylistic effects which would otherwise affect us intellectually but not emotionally. Several scenes, for instance, are dominated by the colours red, white and blue, a deliberately formal effect which works here because it is balanced by other elements (when Paul Schrader uses a similar colour scheme in *American Gigolo* the impression is of affectation); one might also mention the number of times in which dialogue of great thematic significance is passed off as insignificant background 'chat.' It should, however, be stressed that there is absolutely no connection between this style, which exists to facilitate the communication of a project which is both radical and highly complex, and the familiar strategy whereby bourgeois ideology is reinforced under the cover of 'realism.'

One might link this style to May's status, practically unique in the mainstream Hollywood of the 70s, as a female director. William Rothman, in his book on Hitchcock,<sup>3</sup> has observed that Hitchcock's work is driven by the desire for acknowledgement, both stylistically, through overt directorial 'touches,' and thematically, with its recurrent figure of the murderer who both conceives his murder as a work of art and seeks an audience for it. The significance of this, however, extends far beyond Hitchcock, for there is a long tradition in American art, dating back at least as far as Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* and including Scorsese's *The King of Comedy*, in which a desire for acknowledgement is linked with both masculinity and insanity (one might also note the father-son melodramas of the 80s in which either the father desires the son's acknowledgement or the son desires the father's; although the reactionary nature of these films hardly allows insanity to be an issue, masculinity is clearly of the essence).

If, then, the desire for acknowledgement is a typically 'masculine' trait, it seems reasonable to claim that May's style is typically 'feminine.' Consider the way in which May, in *A New Leaf*, the first film that she directed and in which she also stars, introduces herself into the film, in the extreme background of a shot in which she is given no prominence and in which we do not notice her until another character points her out. The masculine desire for acknowledgement is countered here by a female desire to not be



A New Leaf: Elaine May in near-concealment.

acknowledged. Since there are so few female directors, particularly within the Hollywood context, it seems foolish to generalize, but *Mikey and Nicky*'s unique style (I can think of no precedents), alongside its extremely complex examination of a masculine genre, give it a position of some significance. (One should also note May's extreme reluctance either to be interviewed or to be a public figure: she apparently told one reporter, who was writing an article on *Ishtar*, "I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention my name in your article"; the sleeve-notes on the Mike Nichols/Elaine May *Improvisations to Music* album provide a satirical biography but summarize May's career with the comment 'Miss May does not exist'.)

It should, then, be possible to see how this reticent style works to May's advantage by examining what appears to be a gaping technical error. During the long opening sequence in Nick's hotel room we can briefly see a man, presumably a

technician working on the film, reflected in a mirror. It is certainly tempting to regard this as nothing more than a mistake, but, given the fact that May, who had spent such a great amount of time working on the editing, could hardly have failed to notice it even if its filming had been inadvertent (and the shot, which contains no essential action, could easily have been eliminated or shortened without disrupting the continuity), this becomes rather difficult to believe. One is, then, justified in seeing the presence of this mysterious intruder as having some thematic significance (the orgy

2. Ian Cameron, V. F. Perkins, Michael Walker, Jim Hillier and Robin Wood, "The Return of Movie," *Movie* no. 20, Spring 1975, p. 8.

It is, presumably, no more than a remarkable coincidence that Cameron makes this remark in the context of a discussion of Stuart Rosenberg's *The Laughing Policeman*, precisely the film that is showing at the cinema in *Mikey and Nicky*.

3. William Rothman, *The Murderous Gaze*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.

sequence in *Blow Up* by Antonioni, a director not noted for his slapdash approach, contains a similar intruder), reinforcing the film's tone of paranoia and mistrust. One might also note the sequence in which Mike and Nick argue and fight on a supposedly deserted street, during which we are vaguely aware of figures moving about in the background.

This paranoiac tone is very different from that generally found in the 70s 'conspiracy' films, for, rather than being linked to institutions, the paranoia of May's film is seen as arising in response to the everyday organization of contemporary capitalism. At two moments an impersonal attempt to enforce rules leads to violence (the man in the restaurant who refused to sell Mike a carton of cream because he 'wouldn't know what to charge' and the bus driver who insists that the two men leave the bus by the back door), and the furtive glances that Kinney gives to the late night drinkers in the bar, alongside the man working in the candy store who instinctively reaches for his gun when Nick enters, provide us with glimpses of reactions which are both paranoid (since we, at least, understand that neither of these men are in actual danger) and fully justified (since, had the situations been only slightly different, the danger would have been real enough) within a world which is most honestly represented by the brief glimpse of a Kung-Fu film in

the all-night cinema, a world of mindless and directionless violence.

These examples provide minor representations of what is one of May's major thematic concerns, that of the horrific as a logical extension of the normal. When linked with the theme of justified paranoia this gives us the basis for a reading of the relationship between Mike (Peter Falk) and Nick (John Cassavetes), clearly the film's central concern. The opening sequence is crucial for an understanding of this: the film begins with Mike visiting Nick, who believes that there is a contract out on him, in his hotel room. Since we are, at this point, given little information about the situation (except for a newspaper headline reading "Slain bookie called 'small-time hood'") we are essentially forced to share Mike's point of view, doubting the reality of the 'contract' but being aware that it may well exist. The one thing that we are certain of throughout this sequence is that Nick's constant refusal to trust Mike, believing it possible that he is setting him up to be killed, is completely unjustified (though the casting of both Peter Falk and John Cassavetes is clearly intended to capitalize on their work in Cassavetes' own films, it is useful to keep in mind the fact that Falk was at this time strongly associated with the role of Columbo, a figure of unquestionable moral integrity). Following the

Dustin Hoffman(l.) and Warren Beatty (r.) in *Ishtar*, written and directed by Elaine May



men's exit from the hotel about 20 minutes into the film, however, we cut to the hit man, Warren Kinney (Ned Beatty), receiving a telephone call informing him that Nick is in a bar, and we gradually realize that the informant is Mike. The shock of this moment is comparable to Hitchcock's revelation of the solution of the mystery in *Vertigo* about two-thirds into the film. The effect of revealing the fact of Mike's betrayal of Nick at this point is very carefully calculated. Had May given us this information at the beginning, we would have watched all his subsequent actions, which are seemingly tender and caring, in full knowledge of the duplicity that they disguised. On the other hand, had May saved this revelation for the end, we would have taken Mike's actions at face value, only questioning them in retrospect: by placing it where she does, May forces us to evaluate Mike's actions one way, then question what they conceal from the vantage point of our first evaluation. May's point is that Mike's affection for Nick is both feigned and genuine, and that intimate male friendships in our society, based as they are on the suppression of homosexuality and the inability to relate with women, conceal resentments and tensions which logically lead to a situation in which the normal expression of affection can act as the basis for a horrific betrayal: one might note that Mike's expression of concern for his wife ("I don't treat my wife the way you do. If I'm gonna be late, or if I'm gonna be out all night, I call") is simply an excuse for him to give his wife a message which she will pass on to a hit man.

The importance for May of the horrific-as-extension-of-normal theme, both here and in her other work, can be seen by examining the way it is restated, in a comic mode, in the character of the hit man, Warren Kinney. Jean-Luc Godard once wrote...

In *Carabiniers*, having treated as an improvised farce something for which so many men died, it seems to me that the film fulfils the basic requirements of decency. Take concentration camps, for instance. The only real film to be made about them—which has never been made because it would be intolerable—would be if a camp were filmed from the point of view of the torturers and their daily routine. How to get a human body measuring two metres into a coffin measuring fifty centimetres? How to load ten tons of arms and legs on to a three-ton lorry? How to burn a hundred women with petrol enough for ten? One would also have secretaries making lists of everything on their typewriters. The really horrible thing about such scenes would not be their horror but their very ordinary everydayness.<sup>4</sup>

We have here the basis for an understanding of the significance of May's presenting a hit man as a normal, harassed business-man, for the problems faced by Kinney are identical to those faced by any employee of a hierarchical organization: he becomes lost on the way to the rendezvous arranged for the hit and has to stop and ask directions, has a 'misunderstanding' with his boss (though in this world a misunderstanding could easily prove fatal), argues with fellow employee Mike about whose fault it was that the 'job'

went wrong, complains about his expenses ("I should have had a driver on this...If I take a driver I've gotta pay him a buck too...By the time I've paid for the hotel...I ain't gonna make anything on this") and delivers a splendidly precise account of his tribulations in an attempt to justify himself to his employer ("So any estimation of time which I may have given him is dependent on the fact that he knows what I've got to get through"). The essential point about Kinney—that, though he is a killer, he is totally lacking in the aura of evil or menace which we would normally associate with such a character, being rather an exemplary product of the capitalist system—is made on his initial appearance: we first see him in his hotel room flicking through the channels on a television, one of which is playing a particularly banal advertising jingle; he finally settles on a film which features a soundtrack of clichéd 'suspense' music; when he then receives the phone call from Mike this music continues on the soundtrack, providing an ironic background to what is actually a quite everyday discussion. Never is there any hint of morality in Kinney's actions, morality being something that in any organization (whether office or concentration camp) can be safely referred upstairs to those who give the orders. The very language used in business dealings ('making a killing,' for instance) helps to explain how naturally Kinney is able to ignore the fact that his job is to literally kill people.

One of the most effective demonstrations of this theme is the scene in which Mike's wife is unable to find pen and paper in order to write down the address for the hit man and has to resort to asking her young son to bring her a crayon. Her unquestioning acquiescence with the conspiracy is, of course, horrific, but in a sense it is even more horrific when Mike returns home and we realize that she actually knew nothing about what he was doing, simply obeying his instructions.

This brings up the question of the treatment of women in May's work, something which has been the subject of a great deal of feminist animus. Barbara Koenig Quart, for instance, claims that May's women are "disturbingly masochistic" and that Nick's wife "ends up as an exercise in docile female masochism."<sup>5</sup> Yet, far from being a criticism of the film, this is precisely May's point: the emphasis, clearly, is on the limited roles that women are allocated within our society. One might turn, by way of comparison, to David Burton Morris' *Patti Rocks*, with its disastrous portrayal of a liberated woman (always ready with a pithy put-down of male presumption) in its second half schematically balancing a crude first half in which we can sit back and complacently tut-tut at the offensive attitudes of its male protagonists without ever, of course, feeling in any way implicated in them. Male presumption in *Mickey and Nicky* is hardly less securely placed, but our attitude towards it is far from complacent. As a heterosexual male I find it more difficult to distance myself from the attitudes which are, nevertheless,

4. Jean-Luc Godard, "Les Carabiniers under Fire," *Cahiers du Cinéma* no. 138, Dec. 1962. Translated in Tom Milne (ed.), *Godard on Godard*, Martin Secker & Warburg Limited, 1972, p. 198.

5. Barbara Koenig Quart, *Women Directors*, Praeger Publishers, 1988, p. 46-47.

subjected to stringent criticism. As a child I did not 'play' with girls, whom I regarded (if I thought about them at all) as intractably other, while as an adolescent they first took on interest as sexual objects. The relevance of this to *Mikey and Nicky* should be obvious, for May's concern is with the inability of the male to break away from patterns of behaviour established during childhood (Coppola's *The Conversation* explores similar territory). Though the film takes place entirely in one night, we are given a great deal of information about both of the men's lives, and the constant reference point is their shared childhood experience, culminating in the scene in which Nick smashes the watch that Mike had been given by his father. With the symbol of phallic succession destroyed, Mike and Nick cast off all semblance of mature adult behaviour, fighting like children in the street. When the two then split up, Nick, after a visit to both estranged wife and mistress, retreats from these complex female-male relationships to a local candy store where, with the excuse of buying a comic book for Mike's son, he re-enters the simpler world of childhood, eating a lollipop and reading the comic books in the rack ("Don't get them sticky," the store-owner tells him, as if talking to a young child). The impossibility of satisfactorily returning to this simpler world is reinforced not only by the scene's context (the paranoid *noir* world, explicitly present in the store-owner instinctively reaching for his gun) but by the store-owner's final line, as he tells Mike, who had earlier asked if the store stocked 'Necko,' that "I don't think they make Necko anymore."

Mike and Nick's attitude towards women is similarly childish. Though they are both married and have children, they essentially regard women in an adolescent fashion (something that is true of most of the male characters in May's work, their immature treatment of women concealing a neurotic fear of female sexuality: the most obvious example is Henry Graham in *A New Leaf* who, when confronted with a woman who is about to remove her bikini top and reveal her breasts to him, jumps back in terror, screaming "No, don't let them out"). Nick's telling Mike, in the graveyard scene, about how the two of them are such good friends because "we remember each other from when we were kids, things that happened when we were kids that no one else knows about but us" can be taken as his explanation of why he and his wife, Jan (Joyce Van Patten), from whom he separated, are unable to communicate on any level except the shared experience of pain (the pain being explicitly a result of their marriage). Mike's constant claims of how close he and his wife, Annie (Rose Arrick), are seem over-insistent, as if it were himself he was trying to convince (the logic of his needing to phone his wife being actually the cover for his alerting a hit man to Nick's whereabouts is splendid), and the casual way he attempts to seduce Nick's mistress, Nell (Carol Grace), should be enough to make us doubt the truth of these claims, which are, in any case, revealed as a total sham when he finally arrives home and greets a wife to whom he appears to have just been introduced.

Barbara Koenig Quart's astonishing assertion that May's work "has no feminist content"<sup>6</sup> needs to be considered

here. Alongside the crude feminist caricature of *Patti Rocks*, it should be illuminating to place May's characterization of both Mike's wife and Nick's mistress. Whereas for David Burton Morris feminist filmmaking means the presentation of positive role-models for women (basically 'this is how I think woman should be')—it is worth noting that the conception of Patti is nothing more than a male fantasy: the liberated women who is also the endlessly giving mother and receptive sexual partner), for May it means the critique of the limited and limiting models which are actually available for both men and women, not from a position of lofty superiority or complacency, but with a sense of intense identification. It is, of course, true that May's women are as trapped in patterns of childhood behaviour as her men (when Mike tries to seduce her, Nell tells him not to get 'fresh,' as if she were participating in a high school romance), but the more explicit point made about Nell and Annie is that they both reject and are complicit with the myths of romantic fantasy which structure women's expectations of female-male relationships and marriage. This is seen most clearly in the characterization of Nell, whose intense need to be told that she is loved by her seducers (her constant appeal to Nick, during their lovemaking, to "tell me that you love me" is truly heartbreaking) allows Nick to define her as both a 'hooker' and a 'psycho' (she is introduced listening to Sinatra singing "All the Way," an indication of the way in which popular culture can be used to reinforce these ideals). When Nick returns to her, however, she reveals that she knows "all the things that you say about me," only to tearfully ask, "Are you mad at me because I told you I know?" The same point is made, with admirable succinctness, in the presentation of Annie, particularly in one moment when, seeing that Mike has returned home, she begins to fix herself a drink while saying "I was alone, then [in mock-romantic voice] you walked into my life," then, switching to a cold, everyday voice, offering Mike a drink with the question "y'want one?". The switch from the mock-romantic to the practical/everyday (and the subtlety of the performance which May elicits from her actress defies description: the reader is encouraged to return to the film) precisely defines May's attitude towards her characters, who are neither liberated from ideology nor its passive victims.

The process by which both Annie and Nell project romantic fantasies onto men of whose actual inadequacies they are perfectly aware is placed by the presence of a woman, in the first bar that Mike and Nick visit, who seems to be involved in an act of mutual seduction with a man. It is crucial that this woman be peripheral to the world that May depicts but central to the film's structure; she plays no part in the narrative, existing outside of the narrative drive, and neither Mike nor Nick seems to even notice her; she is, nevertheless, granted a significant number of close-ups, indicating her importance for May as a character who refuses to allow men to have the privilege of the active role (one of her lines which we overhear is "He doesn't have a gun"). The final shot in which she appears shows her saying "Aren't you clever?" to her male companion, her aim, in contrast to the projections of Annie and Nell, being to attain her own ends by calculatedly flattering the male ego.

This character moves further towards the centre of May's only subsequent film, the delightful *Ishtar*, in which the person of Shirra Assel (Isabelle Adjani), who deliberately flatters masculine presumption ("The Hawk. It is a very bold name...Does the Hawk fly?") in order to manipulate Chuck Clarke (Dustin Hoffman) into assisting in her attempt to bring down a patriarchal government which has links with the U.S., and it is clearly significant that the woman whose project is the overthrow of patriarchy should at first be mistaken by both Clarke and Lyle Rogers (Warren Beatty) for a male homosexual. Her appearance at the film's climax may seem to contradict this, her feminine dress fulfilling Lyle's dream of her "dressed like a girl" and her comment "I think they're wonderful" distinguished from her earlier flattery by being patently sincere, but what is crucial here is that the two men's running argument as to whose 'girl' she is has been entirely forgotten, enabling her to express her love of them both. That Assel's refusal of sexual exclusivity immediately follows her overthrow of patriarchal organization (she has just won the right to dictate social reforms in *Ishtar*) testifies to the admirable logic with which May probes her material until it reaches the most radical conclusions.

The film's most obvious connection to *Mikey and Nicky*, however, is in its focus on the relationship of two men whose closeness, mutual understanding and affection easily slip over into jealousy and betrayal as a result of being based on a flight from women whose desires they do not share and whose demands they fail to comprehend. The point is neatly made by Clarke's lover, Carol (Carol Kane), who walks out on him after telling him that "If you never see me again it'll only be one time less a week than you see me now."

Carol's attitude here is similar to that expressed in *Mikey and Nicky* by Nick's wife, Jan, who is allowed to articulate the film's view of female-male relationships far more directly than Nell or Annie, since her marriage has already dissolved, a process which is seen as inevitable. May's view of heterosexual relationships in general, and marriage in particular, is among the bitterest in American cinema (she had herself been the victim of two very brief and unsuccessful marriages); both *A New Leaf* and *The Heartbreak Kid* focus on marriages in which the man's role is to destroy the woman (consciously in the former, unconsciously, but just as viciously, in the latter). It is important to note, however, that none of the marriages in May—including that of Henry Graham (Walter Matthau) in *A New Leaf*, who marries with the express purpose of killing his wife at the earliest opportunity in order to live off her money—is seen as *unusually* bad: they are simply representative.

The attitudes in May's films show a quite marked progression. *A New Leaf* adopts the viewpoint of its monstrous male protagonist, but this viewpoint is plainly ironic, insisting that we identify with a position which the film has unambiguously discredited. (The film's relationship to the cycle of Freudian-feminist melodramas is similar to that of *Mikey and Nicky* to the 'buddy' film, and the fact that, while the films of this cycle were directed by men but featured women as their identification figures, the first of them to be directed by a woman should centre on a man is of obvious

significance.) *The Heartbreak Kid*, however, maintains a rigorous detachment (many scenes are filmed in long takes by an unmoving camera) in order to present us with one of the most intolerable protagonists in any dramatic work (an attitude which is entirely a product of the direction: it seems fairly clear that Neil Simon's screenplay had quite the opposite aim).

*Mikey and Nicky's* strategy is quite different, for it is of the film's essence that we are both intimately involved with and rigorously detached from all the major characters, female and male (a principle which is even extended to Warren Kinney). May never attaches blame to individuals but to the institutions (of marriage, of masculinity, of femininity, of alienated labour) of which they are all victims.

The significance of Jan's speech to Nick, then, needs to be carefully considered. When Nick visits her in order to attempt a reconciliation, she says:

Isn't this the way your girlfriends treat you? Tell me how they treat you and I'll try to copy them. What's the matter, is everybody else busy tonight, all your girlfriends busy, the boys too busy to have a drink with you? It's a shame that Resnick wants to have you killed because now you won't be able to spend all of your evenings with him. Tell me what he used to do that was so wonderful and I'll try to copy it.

Clearly this is close to a direct thematic statement, but what receives emphasis here is not just the words but the pain and disillusionment which they communicate. May is never tempted, as Jan is here, to place direct blame on Nick. Nevertheless we can, by working outwards from Jan's speech, discover exactly what May is saying about heterosexual relationships between men and between men and women.

It becomes clear, for instance, that Mike's setting Nick up to be killed is not the betrayal of their friendship that it had seemed, but rather a logical extension of it (the relationship is paralleled in Jan's description of Nick's relationship with Resnick). The repression of sexuality in the two men's relationship has resulted in its being constructed upon suppression, mutual resentment and power struggles. Whereas, in the opening sequences, Mike had seemed to be a mother figure to Nick (he tries to force medicine into his mouth with the words "open the door, let the train come in"), by the time they part the roles have been reversed, with Nick the father apologizing for having let down his son ("What am I supposed to do, carry you around with me in my pocket?"). The denial of homosexuality has its concomitant in the corruption of heterosexuality, most obvious in the visit to Nell, during which Nick attempts to prove his heterosexuality with a totally loveless display of sexual prowess. The most important part of this act, for Nick, is the fact of his performing it in front of Mike and then encouraging him to do the same thing (Nick had earlier insisted on answering Mike's questions to Nell, and we later find out that he has a habit of boasting of his sexual achievements while suggest-

6. Quart, p. 39.



Patti Rocks: a 'buddy' movie with feminist aspirations.

ing that they should try to seduce Nell too). That the closest the two men can come to making love to each other is by making love to the same woman is something of a mainstay of the buddy film,<sup>7</sup> but what receives equal emphasis here is the ignominy of this process for the woman in question. Consider the shot which follows Nick and Nell's love-making: Nick stands up, walks towards the kitchen where Mike is waiting, and begins talking misogynistically about Nell. The kitchen is on screen-right at the back of the frame, and the red light emanating from it provides the only light source, ensuring that our attention is focused on the two men's conversation, though we may be aware of Nell as she begins to move to a sitting position at screen-left; suddenly, however, she turns on a table lamp, and the whole focus of the composition changes; now, with the entire frame clearly visible, we are aware not just of Nick's offensive comments, but of their affect on Nell (she can presumably hear his remarks as well as we can, and visibly reacts to his "she likes everybody").

It must again be stressed, however, that this does not result in the idealisation of the feminine position, for Nell, though presented as both sensitive and intelligent, is fully complicit in her own objectification. One moment can stand as representative; when Mike initiates his attempt at seduction by telling her that "most pretty girls, they don't have a brain in their head," Nell, at a loss as to what else to say, concurs with a weak "Yes, I guess most girls are pretty dumb."

The crisis in heterosexual relationships seen here has become so explicit as a result of the upheavals of the period in which the film was made (significantly during Nick's seduction of Nell a radio can be heard delivering the latest news from Vietnam, while Mike delivers a monologue about how "they got the biggest army in the world, those

Chinese...millions of peasants"), but it can clearly be traced to the artificial barriers which the capitalist system erects between people. The film is full of people who have been arbitrarily classified into exclusive groups; racial (the black bar); religious (the Catholic cemetery, 'full of Irishmen,' where Mike recites a Jewish prayer); class based (Mike tells Resnick that he lives in "an exclusive neighbourhood. They had to take a vote on me before I could buy the house"); and, predominantly, sexual, the mutually incompatible desires of men and women within our society being demonstrated by the motif of the light which both Nell and Annie switch on only to have it immediately switched off by Nick and Mike. The key motif here, however, is the locked door (established in the opening shot) through which various characters attempt to communicate (Mike and Nick at both the hotel and Mike's house, Nick and Jan, Nick's second visit to Nell), culminating in the extraordinary sequence in which Mike refuses to allow Nick entry into his home, enabling Kinney to shoot him. It is appropriate that the final door we see should end up covered in blood.

The film's final sequence, set in Mike's suburban home, is characterized by a sense of emptiness. May stresses the large, barely furnished spaces of the living-room, and contrasts the lack of genuine communication between husband and wife with the close male friendship in which we have, up to this point, been involved (the lack of communication between men and women is ironically suggested by Nick's observation, in the cemetery, that it is "very hard to talk to a dead person. Nothing in common"). Throughout this sequence Annie and Mike are placed either at opposite ends of the frame, or in chairs spaced well apart from each other. In several shots a bottle on the table between them is placed centre-screen; this bottle is a typical May motif, performing several



Patti Rocks: John Jenkins and Chris Mulkey.

functions simultaneously: it divides the frame, emphasizing the separation of Mike and Annie; it is, in this context, the phallus, the centre of the symbolic order which divides male and female; and, finally, it refers us back to the earlier scene in the bar, where the drinks shared by Mike and Nick (who both have the phallus) served the opposite function, uniting rather than dividing.

If I now choose to return to the question, posed at the outset, of how a woman can communicate within a system of narrative widely supposed to serve the interests of patriarchy, it is in the hope that the answer is already evident. Certainly the climax of May's film conforms structurally to those of our dominant narratives. It relates clearly to the film's opening (with Mike and Nick attempting to communicate through a locked door), making it a perfect example of the end answering the beginning. The end also involves the restoration of a disrupted normality and the removal of the threat to that normality. It is even true that the normality which is restored is defined, as so often, as the heterosexual, white, bourgeois couple. The attitude towards all of this is, however, quite distinct, the killing of Nick and survival of the couple being seen in terms of total negativity, and this not as something that can be bought out of the text by a process of close-reading which reveals an attitude of ironic distance, but, quite clearly, as what the film emphatically and unambiguously does.

This is not to say that May's vision is in any way pessimistic, for if the world she depicts is uncompromisingly bleak, the film, through its thorough and clear-sighted presentation of the issues involved, has the force of a radical protest against an intolerable situation. May does not see this as the point at which to present answers or alternatives, but it is clear that she is very much aware of the form that any

attempt to construct an alternative would take. It is, therefore, appropriate that the only point at which this attempt is articulated within the film should be marginalized, pushed into the background, rendered seemingly insignificant. During the sequence in which Annie prepares a drink while Mike gazes out of the window of their house, she says:

Did you ever go to one of those meetings at school? They have sewing at school. The boys sew and the girls go to shop, y'know because I think that you're not supposed to think that only women sew and only men carve.

This dialogue, with its implication of the importance, for both women and men, of ceasing to place certain activities and patterns of behaviour within exclusive gender categories, seems, in turn, to prompt Mike's recollection of his parents' reaction to his ten-year-old brother's death: "My father cried, I remember, but my mother, she just sat there."

The force of the great tragedies depends for its effect upon the presence of a utopian ideal, and the placing of the above quoted dialogue near the end of May's film does not soften the bleakness of its vision; rather it gives it its force and coherence, allowing it to achieve an emotional effect which is, quite simply, devastating. *Mickey and Nicky* seems to me to be among the richest experiences the cinema has to offer.

(We have been unable to find a single still from *Mickey and Nicky*, which testifies further to the film's unwarranted neglect. It is available on video, though hard to track down.—The Editors)

7. Robert Towne's schematic *Tequila Sunrise* is particularly clear on this point, allowing Michelle Pfeiffer to tell Kurt Russell, "You want to fuck your friend then fuck him not me."

# The Cat with Green Wings

FEMININE RESISTANCE  
AND NARRATIVITY IN  
RADHA BHARADWAJ'S  
*CLOSET LAND*

by *Viveca Grettton*



Radha Bharadwaj's *Close Land* (1991) screened in Toronto at the Festival of Festivals after opening theatrically in the U.S. in March of 1991. Yet, despite its big-name production company (Ron Howard's Imagine Entertainment) and major Hollywood distributor (Universal), it subsequently seemed to disappear from both public and critical view. This was indeed unfortunate; *Close Land* warrants further consideration because Bharadwaj's complex and multi-layered narrative dramatizes the strategies of patriarchal oppression and their effects on the individual, and figuratively melds, by way of an audacious narrative twist, the personal with the political. Indeed, *Close Land* demands an analysis at various levels, especially in terms of the extent to which violence and resistance becomes the subject of narrativity itself.



Madeleine Stowe in  
*Closet Land*: Defying  
definitive meanings  
and closure

Bharadwaj is an accomplished documentary filmmaker and playwright, and her struggle to maintain control of her first feature film, and to direct her own award-winning screenplay without sacrificing the right to final-cut is certainly a testament to her perseverance. Although a Hollywood-produced film starring two well-known actors, *Closet Land* was bound to challenge superficial expectations with its stylized single set, its cast of two (simply referred to as "Man" and "Woman"), its unspecified time and locale, and its constantly shifting narrative structured around extremes of physical and mental torture. Although many critics acknowledged Bharadwaj's courage in overcoming the almost insurmountable obstacles to realizing a project such as *Closet Land*, the overall response to this impressive directorial debut was either to dismiss the film as a political exercise in left-wing "correctness," or conversely, to accuse the film of undermining its own political message by what was perceived by some as its concessions to Hollywood "glitz":

with its appealing cast, gorgeous costumes, and Eiko-conceived set, the movie risks overwhelming fascism

with fascinating fashion, a weakness that almost upends its lofty aspirations... A gooey humanism smothers the film... Issues of sexual politics and child abuse, empowerment and agency are swept together with confusing, reckless abandon.<sup>1</sup>

Although Manohla Dargis' comments certainly raise the question of what, precisely, a political film is supposed to look like, they also articulate the exact problematic faced in extricating *Closet Land* from reductive readings that would see it either as an exercise in designer sadism or as a simple polemic against state torture. Yet if *Closet Land* has its distractingly tendentious moments, these are more than compensated by its thematic, structural, and narrative strengths, and by the sensitive and intelligent performances of Madeleine Stowe and Alan Rickman.<sup>2</sup> A more thorough narrative analysis, in fact, need not divorce the film from its political contexts nor be allied to a "gooey humanism" that

1. Manohla Dargis, "Closet Case," *Village Voice* April 2, 1991, p. 56.

2. Bharadwaj states in a newspaper interview that Stowe "coincided with my idea about the woman, which was inspired by the woman in *The Passion of Joan of Arc*" (*Daily Breeze*, March 6, 1991).



Alan Rickman and Madeleine Stowe: analysis as discipline

would insist on the universality of its truths or posit freedom of speech as the emblem of transcendent authorial privilege.

In contrast to Dargis' cursory political analysis, Kathleen Murphy reads the entire film as a projected fantasy of the woman, an extension of her creative imagination by which she performs an empowering re-enactment of the significant events, traumas, and relationships in her life:

Out of her imagination's rich store, Stowe has created a man of many parts, an actor who will play both satan and saviour to her sinner. Rickman receives her as the "officer in charge," but he wears many masks—Grand Inquisitor, fellow victim, father, lover, therapist/the rapist—before he baptizes Stowe into authentic selfhood.<sup>3</sup>

However gratifying it would be to believe that the heroine triumphs by "making her way on her own power," reading the film in this way is itself an extreme example of wish-fulfilment, a perhaps understandable attempt to read empowerment into an apparently hopeless situation. While it is true that one must evaluate the allegorical aspects of such a narrative, to do so by importing childbirthing metaphors that would promote the film as a feminine coming-to-consciousness tale only mystifies the film by displacing the pos-

sibility of a genuine allegorical reading.<sup>4</sup> Further, the notion of "authentic self-hood" is a bourgeois construction at best, a mythic position of privilege that would, above all, obscure the meaning of the woman's final resistance and run the risk of absurdly naturalizing patriarchal brutality as part of a painful but necessary healing process. (In any case, it seems more appropriate to a feminist reading that the site of torture be precisely the stylized high-tech corporate boardroom we are given, and not the "uterine hell" Murphy describes.)

The confusion that Dargis isolates in *Closet Land* becomes for Kate Millet a complex network of interrelated issues. Millet examines *Closet Land* in *The Politics of Cruelty*, her upcoming publication on state torture:

This merging of state interrogator with child molester is a daring device and could only succeed in a context as metaphoric as this. The woman as victim has been replaced by the child as victim, the duality of man and woman, state and citizen running now on a female continuum, stages of oppression from the sexual exploitation and abuse of female children leading to female arrest for sexual activity rather than overtly political charges.<sup>5</sup>

Millet's valuable analysis of how *Closet Land* signifies in

relation to patriarchy, gender politics, and the practice of state torture is not a "literal" reading of the film; indeed, she seems fully aware of the levels at which *Close Land* functions allegorically and metaphorically.

Yet *Close Land* is driven by simultaneous and often conflicting narratives that unfold at various levels; these narratives are arrested, disclosed, or divulged as the characters alternately withhold, reveal, or betray secrets. There are, in fact, at least three "Close Lands"; first there is the "real" story, the narrative space defined by the events that unfold between the time the woman (Stowe) finds herself blinded by the light of the interrogation room and faced with her sadistic interrogator (Rickman), to the final, inconclusive scene when she walks out into that same brightness. Secondly, these events themselves are structured upon the analytical, literary, and judicial interpretations that emerge within the film, and upon an interpretation violently imposed upon a pre-existing narrative, *Close Land*, the unpublished manuscript of a children's book that has been suspected of sedition and for which the woman has been arrested. These interpretations and narratives meld as the female prisoner/author is forced to violently re-enact the repressed, allegorized content of her book. It is at this level, too, that the central characters are subsumed within a perverse and violent psychoanalytic "narrative." Finally, there is *Close Land*, the indeterminate space that simultaneously exists outside, and yet partakes of all the other narratives, and which constitutes, in fact, the "safer place" that consistently eludes the sadistic male reader/interrogator/analyst.

### The Un-Pleasure of the Text

If the desire of the man is to "know," to have the secrets in *Close Land* revealed to him, the violent expression of his desire is particularly applied to the female body. Further, the menstrual blood "search" and the electrodes applied to the genitals are, in fact, predicated upon an earlier, traumatic childhood molestation. Narrative desire in *Close Land* clearly highlights our own complicity in state oppression and physical violence: the interrogator's desire to have the secrets of *Close Land* revealed are not necessarily in conflict with our own desire, for, like him we want the truth of the children's story, its subversiveness, revealed to us. The generalizing and distancing effects of allegory, in particular, are undone by the extent to which we are subjectively aligned with the film's hermeneutic code. The woman's final "victory" doesn't quite serve to nullify the sense of horror one feels watching oneself watch the prisoner humiliated, brutalized, and tortured. Further, the sexual torture of the victim is not fetishized to allow a secure and distanced van-

tage point from which to contemplate the victim. Voyeurism is self-consciously foregrounded as the cinema itself becomes yet another instrument of torture available to a state apparatus that will film and record the individual's most private and intimate moments (the woman is filmed in bed with a lover, her conversation with her dying mother has been taped).

Yet the interrogator ultimately attempts to control the

3. Kathleen Murphy, "Foreign Parts," *Film Comment*, Vol. 27 (May/June 1991) p. 10

4. Moreover, the imaginative powers available to the tortured woman in *Close Land* are far from the empowered "scripting" of the narrative that, for example, the heroines of Rivette's *Céline and Julie Go Boating* (1974) demonstrate.

5. Kate Millett, "Close Land," *Visions Magazine* No. 8 (Fall 1992): 31.

Madeleine Stowe and Alan Rickman in Radha Bharadwaj's  
*Close Land* (1991)



woman by, in effect, narrating her past, a past that will somehow prove the truth of her present "guilt." He employs a combination of violently crude and subtly sophisticated methods to coerce the woman into concurring with his version of events and distrusting her own. In one particular instance he dresses her in ridiculous black lingerie and smears her face with garish makeup while a recorded voice intones statistical "facts" about feminine sexual practices.

Without doubt, some of the more terrifying moments of *Close Land* are to be located within the powerful mythology of an analytic practice in which the analyst offers to "cure" the hysterical woman. Thus the interrogator/prisoner relationship becomes in *Close Land* a violent and critical parody that purposely brings inquisition and analysis into an uncomfortably close proximity. At one point the interrogator blindfolds the woman while he assumes the part of a comrade or fellow prisoner that he, in turn, pretends to torture. It is clear that the transference is an explicitly fraudulent strategy perpetrated by the "analyst" in order to gain and retain control. Further, though the counter-transference is evident throughout the film, it is apotheosized in the final revelation that the interrogator himself sexually assaulted the woman in her childhood. This narrative revelation strengthens the patient's resolve not to surrender to the analyst; what was to have been a "normative" cure will become, instead, the articulation of an unshakeable political opposition to the interrogator and to the state.

### The Cat with Green Wings

The woman's resistance to analysis and interpretation is punished throughout by extreme physical abuse. From the very beginning, the man applies a variety of techniques to break her down: crude physical blows, institutionalized "medical" mutilation, bizarre and humiliating multi-media seminars on her supposed sexual dysfunctions. These scenes are increasingly punctuated by the intonation of formulaic dogma as the interrogator struggles to retain his authority as "the officer in charge." Against these formulas, both recorded and spoken, the woman begins to frame her own counter-formulations. Her attempts at physical resistance (she kicks him in the groin) are eventually overwhelmed by the sinister technological resources available to the interrogator. It becomes increasingly clear to the woman that she must derive strength from the very act of imaginative resistance alone, and her refusal to sign the confession is now accompanied by an enigmatic smile that further infuriates her captor.

At one point in the film, she is advised by her "confederate" to "think of something pleasant" to sustain the horrific torture she will undoubtedly receive. The woman responds by briefly imagining the Cat with Green Wings, a character she has created in her children's books. However, the Cat has now radically evolved from the cuddly, benign nursery creation she introduced at the beginning of the film. The Cat, a representation of her fear, and most importantly, her rage, now snarls and bares its teeth as it unfurls its huge wings. Later, as the man tears out her toenail with a pair of pliers,

she literally invokes the Cat with Green Wings as a means of abstracting herself from the agony. In an animated sequence, the Cat swoops down, picks her up with his claws, and flies her to safety. The success of this "escape" leaves her captor in awe, and he pushes himself away from her in horror.

The interrogator wants the woman to acknowledge that *Close Land*, the children's book, is coded, and that his reading of it is correct and definitive. He himself deconstructs the subversive connotations in the word "closet." In reality, the state must be assured that her fictional characters are simple substitutions for actual existing political agents and thus can be contained or neutralized through exposure, arrest, and elimination. However, it is suggested that the woman's fictional characters are far more dangerous as by-products of her repressed anger and rage. The Cat with Green Wings, the Flying Cow, and the Friendly Rooster are entirely beyond authoritative control and will perpetually defy the definitive meanings and closure imposed by a punitive and interventive patriarchal state.

The woman's fictional characters were mobilized first as a means of surviving childhood rape, and then as a means of withstanding adult torture. However, the possibility of yet a further transformation exists: if the Cat with Green Wings, a childhood protector, is finally released from the closet, it might emerge as an effective and unforgiving agent of adult feminine revenge. The interrogator, who has in fact always known the real significance of *Close Land*, recognizes the genuine threat to the state that such rage, if mobilized and organized, might represent. The woman's politicization is initiated by the recognition that she herself "never noticed" the oppression suffered by other women who had been persecuted by the state, much in the same way that her own mother had "not noticed" that her five-year-old daughter was being violated by a lover.

At another level, the interrogator's attempts to interpose himself within her narrative, to force her to "expose" him as the central character in her book, *Close Land*, are in part his need for her to validate his own centrality (this is what Millet refers to as his "great narcissism"), and in part, attempts to re-author *Close Land* in accordance with official versions of sedition. The man and the state have been allegorically displaced in the children's book, and the man's real focus is upon this exclusion rather than upon an actual content. The prisoner's final refusal to sign the prepared confession is proof that the interrogator's attempts both to coerce her into validating his version of her life and to ensure that what lies buried in *Close Land* will never emerge to threaten him, have failed. In one sense, the interrogator is correct: *Close Land* is indeed a subversive book, a child's and woman's narrative of rage and survival that endures, despite attempts to suppress or appropriate it. Without a doubt, the film presents a depressing and deterministic universe from which there is little chance of escape. Yet, within this universe "*Close Land*" itself remains a cypher, perhaps even a tentative inscription of hope. Though certainly the location of violent childhood trauma, and perhaps also the site of ongoing adult repression, it represents the potential for reframing what was a tale of victimization into an active, on-going narrative of feminine resistance.



LILLIAN GISH 1896 - 1993 (with Jennifer Jones in *Duel in the Sun*, 1946)

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**Viveca Gretton**, a Toronto writer and contributing editor to *What Magazine*, is currently co-writing a feature screenplay.

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**Robin Wood** is completing his last book of film criticism.

**Audrey Hepburn**  
1929 - 1993

